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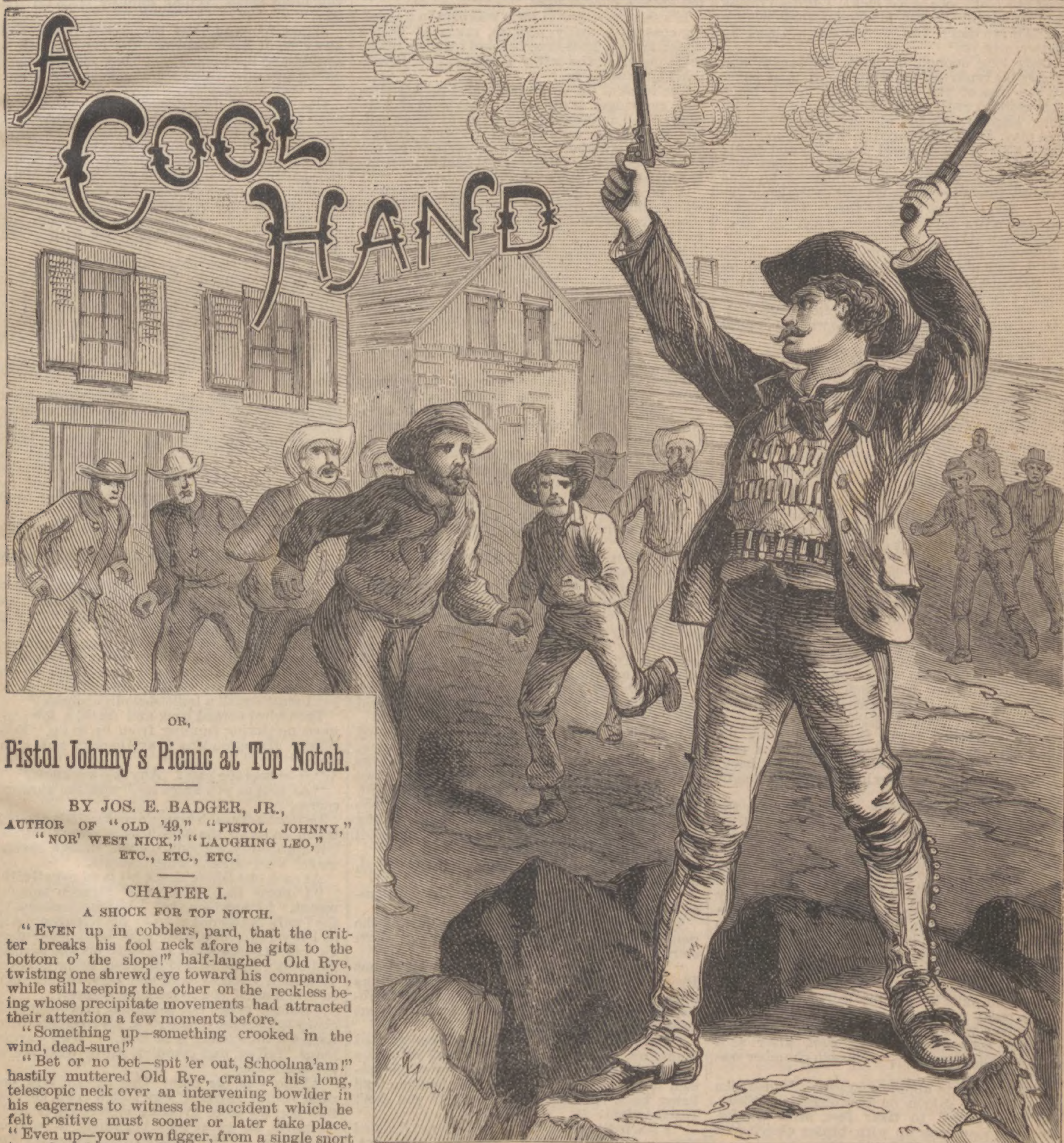
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OR,
Pistol Johnny's Picnic at Top Notch.

BY JOS. E. BADGER, JR.,
AUTHOR OF "OLD '49," "PISTOL JOHNNY,"
"NOR' WEST NICK," "LAUGHING LEO,"
ETC., ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

A SHOCK FOR TOP NOTCH.

"EVEN up in cobblers, pard, that the critter breaks his fool neck afore he gits to the bottom o' the slope!" half-laughed Old Rye, twisting one shrewd eye toward his companion, while still keeping the other on the reckless being whose precipitate movements had attracted their attention a few moments before.

"Something up—something crooked in the wind, dead-sure!"

"Bet or no bet—spit'er out, Schoolma'am!" hastily muttered Old Rye, craning his long, telescopic neck over an intervening boulder in his eagerness to witness the accident which he felt positive must sooner or later take place. "Even up—your own figger, from a single snort to a dead lay-out! Even up, an' I'd 'a' won ef you'd bet!"

JAY DILLON DREW A REVOLVER WITH EACH HAND, AND TURNING THE MUZZLES HEAVENWARD, HE FIRED SHOT AFTER SHOT WITH STARTLING RAPIDITY.

Old Rye sprung around the boulder with a grating sound that was half exultation, half dismay; one born of natural pride in his own acumen, the other springing from a far more tender heart than a stranger would have dreamed of finding beneath such an unpromising exterior.

"He's up again! He never fell flat! Satan keeps a hand under all such men as he!" hoarsely muttered the one addressed as Schoolma'am.

"Scorch my thrapple ef it ain't so!" spluttered Old Rye, his voice fairly cracking with enthusiasm as he again caught sight of that flying shape. "Steel springs an' rubber muskles! Football ain't nowhar! Most monstrous dry he must be, or he'd never be in sech a hurry fer to ketch up with the p'izen o' Top Notch! I jest tuck one common snift, an' afore I could bat the eyes o' me twicet, I could smell my boots a-scorchin'!"

The Schoolma'am drew a long breath, that was almost a shiver, as he saw that flying figure reach the foot of the steep slope in safety, catching at a stunted tree to steady itself for a brief space before pressing on to the mining-town which lay between the rock-ribbed hills.

"He's running for blood, or from blood! Only Satan's work could set Jay Dillon on fire like that. Ugh!" with a cold shiver, turning away as he added: "Come on, pard. It touches a match to my brain, just to look at that crafty scoundrell! Come on, I say! There's a scent in the air as of a den of angry rattlers!"

"Bet's a bet, an' I pay when I lose, pard. The critter made the rifle, an' we're goin' back to camp fer to sponge out the score. Won't take long nur cost much, good luck! Git dead drunk jest by smellin' of the label on a single whisky bottle down thar! Got to—jest look at the pesky critter, will ye?"

Only long enough to catch his breath and steady his brain did the white-faced man pause at the base of the steep incline. With black eyes glowing redly, with chest squared and head flung back to give his already laboring lungs free play, Jay Dillon raced on toward Top Notch like a man on whose speed hangs life and death.

Surely it must be a matter of moment that could transform the elegant, indolent, icy-cold gambler into a headlong courier or fugitive like this! And so thought more than "The Schoolma'am," a few moments later, when the man-racer was sighted from town.

Like all other young mining-towns, Top Notch had its own ideas about the necessity of keeping the Sabbath holy. A man must rest, the sturdy diggers were wont to say, and on Sunday pick and shovel were granted a respite, while their owners flocked into camp—not to worship, unless at the bar or card-tables.

It was high noon when Jay Dillon came back to Top Notch—that peculiar breathing-spell between the wild orgies of Saturday night and its wilder sequel which would end only with the dawning of a new day.

Many of the miners were out in the warm sun, yawning and blinking, getting up an appetite for more nourishing food than "benzine." There was a clear, level stretch between Top Notch and the hills, and dull-eyed though the majority of the citizens were, first one and then another caught sight of the figure racing toward them.

"A two-legged comet eloping from its orbit!" "Durn the odds, ef it only kin brush the cobwebs out o' our eyes!"

"Excuse me, gents!" hastily chimed in a third, sidling toward the nearest open doorway. "When Jay Dillon forgets to be elegantly lazy, my modesty begins to strike in—and so do I—at the first hole I find!"

Silence followed this hasty speech. And something of the estimation in which Jay Dillon was held could be guessed by the manner in which those reckless men drew aside, their hands mechanically feeling if their weapons were in order.

White-faced, stern, his jetty eyes flashing fire, the racer entered town, never slackening his long, swift strides as he passed the nearest citizens. More than one sturdy fellow shrunk back, a cold shiver running over his frame as he caught that scorching glance.

"To the square!" came pantingly from the lips of the racer, though he never slackened his pace in the least. "There's Satan's own work been done! To the square—one and all!"

Straight on to the center of the little town dashed Jay Dillon, only pausing when "the square" was gained—a curious pile of mighty rocks and spurs rising from the level ground—a strange freak of nature, which it would take too much powder and labor to remove while vacant space was so plentiful on every hand. "The public square," some facetious soul had dubbed this rocky mass.

With an agile bound, Jay Dillon reached one of the rocky points, and standing erect he drew a revolver with each hand, turning the grim muzzles heavenward, firing shot after shot with startling rapidity, until each chamber was emptied.

The effect was almost magical. Armed men rushed out of saloon or gambling-hell. Sleeping men leaped to their feet, wide awake. Drunken men rose up with brains clearing as through magic.

As the boatswain's whistle aboard ship, or

the electric alarm on shore calls the fire ladders to duty, just so this swift fusillade acted on the citizens of Top Notch. There was work to be done, and each man sprung forward to perform his share.

Stern, pale-faced, the veins still swelling on his high temples, Dillon stood on the rock point swiftly reloading his pistols, guided by the sense of touch alone. His eyes were roving keenly over the scene, noting each man as he came hurriedly forward, hand on weapons.

Some of them slackened their pace as they caught sight of the man standing on the rock. A few even sidled nearer the most convenient cover, as though suspecting evil. But if Jay Dillon saw this—and those blazing orbs seemed to drink in even the slightest detail—he made no sign.

Taller than the majority of men, Jay Dillon was a little too narrow across the shoulders for perfect symmetry; but this was the only fault which could be found with him, physically speaking. What he lacked in muscular power he more than made up for in activity. And, as one of the men who knew him best observed:

"What matter, even ef he was thin as a lath? The fingers don't wear nails that kin grip him, ef Jay's guns says not!"

A head that was perfectly shaped, a face that was almost too beautiful for a man, despite its thinness, with features clear-cut and patrician in mold.

A helmet shooting-cap lay on the rock at his feet. The gentle breeze stirred the short, jetty curls above his temples, and caressed the silken mustache that shaded without entirely concealing his red, curved lips.

His slender, graceful form was clad in a shooting-coat with many pockets, made of brown duck; in vest, knee-breeches and leggings of the same material, the latter strapped over broad-soled hunting-shoes.

The front of the vest was studded thickly with long cartridges slipped into neat loops of webbing—fixed ammunition for a rifle of heavy caliber, though the man carried no such weapon just now. Another belt, with cartridges for the brace of revolvers which he still held in his neatly gloved hands, ran around his waist.

A becoming dress, on the whole, though so widely different from the one most familiar to those who knew Jay Dillon, gambler, speculator, gentleman of leisure. Even among his class, proverbially expensively and neatly clad, Jay Dillon was noted for his costly attire.

"What's the row, Dillon?" called out one of the later comers, as he pressed close up to the base of the rock on which the tall gambler was standing. "You ain't fetching your meat into camp on its own feet, are you?"

A low, half-uneasy laugh greeted this ancient jest from the mass.

There was always more or less of this strange unrest where Jay Dillon formed part of the company. Perhaps it was born of the dark record which, it was hinted, his polished "guns" had left behind him.

"There's work for men at hand—work for the hangman, too!" the tall gambler said, his tones clear, yet filled with sternly repressed emotion.

"There's men in plenty, but a hangman—"

The speaker shrugged his shoulders, with a half-grin as he cast a swift glance around the crowd.

Jay Dillon showed his white teeth below his jetty mustache as he added:

"I'll fill that position if none other volunteers; ay! and feel proud of the commission, too!"

George Hampton grew sober enough as he gazed keenly into that hard-set face. This was no ordinary emergency, no mad prank such as occasionally comes to relieve the monotony of mining-camp life.

"What's up? Out with it, man!" he frowned, impatiently. "It's no common deal that would put a rope into those gloved hands of yours!"

Jay Dillon glanced swiftly over the interested crowd, and as a red light flashed into his eyes, he slightly inclined his head. The motion was so slight that it passed unnoticed by all save two men, who each altered his position in the crowd. Curiously enough, each one moved toward the same point, pausing again and almost facing each other though there was a tall, graceful figure between them.

"There's been foul murder committed, and—"

"On whom? Give the name, man!" interposed Hampton, sharply.

The ghost of a smile curled the red lips of the gambler, then passed away, leaving them sterner than before.

"You know my old habit; I'm no angel, but I've got to get a little pure air on at least one day each week, and I prefer to spend the Sabbath in the hills to drinking and wearing out cards here in camp."

"Lucky for us poor devils, too!" commented Hampton, with a shrug of his broad shoulders that spoke volumes to all who knew of his passion for short cards. "You go hunting, and bring back six days' luck, even if you don't catch a clam!"

"I started out this morning, as usual," added the gambler, frowning a trifle at the grim jest. "I really meant business, as you can guess

when I say that I went even beyond the Lone Cabin."

A little mutter ran through the crowd. Hardly a man present but could have repeated the dark story of that lonely hut, where a man, driven to the wilderness by some terrible crime or heart-breaking grief, had dragged out a miserable existence, to, in the end, rush unbidden into the presence of his Maker, to be found, weeks after, with one hand still clasping the knife that had been self-driven into his heart.

"It's a ghost story, then?" half laughed Hampton, his mind reverting to the wild, fantastic tales which the superstitious miners were wont to tell of the suicide and his cabin. "Yet I could almost take oath you are sober, now!"

"I was sober when I reached the cabin, but if I had been crazy drunk, what I saw there would have driven every fume away," gravely returned the gambler, one hand quickly passing across his white brow.

"Saw, or fancied?" persisted the doubter, as he noted the instinctive widening of the space about him as the citizens shrunk to either side like men who expect the passage of cold lead.

Hardly another man in Top Notch would have dared thus chaff Jay Dillon, but George Hampton did not know the meaning of the word fear, and, mixed with his really strong liking for the gambler, was a curious contempt which he could not resist airing, at times, no matter how grave the circumstances might be.

For one thing, he felt that this reluctance to playing cards on Sunday, which Dillon professed and always practiced, could only be superstition or hypocrisy, and he never tired of ridiculing these regular hunting trips on that day.

Dillon frowned, but his gloved hands kept away from his weapons. His eyes seemed to avoid those mocking orbs. They paused longest on the two men whose simultaneous movements have been noted.

One was tall, broad-shouldered, muscular almost to clumsiness, and dark and swarthy as a Gypsy, with Indian-like features. The other was his exact opposite in almost every respect, being short and dumpy, half as broad as he was tall, looking as though some mighty weight had crushed him together from top to bottom. His hair was red as brickdust, shaggy and coarse almost as straw. His face was still redder, and his little, bulbous nose shone out with a still more lurid glow.

"I wish it was only fancy," muttered the gambler, clearing his throat before he added, in more distinct tones: "It's no fairy tale I've got to tell, gentlemen, but the black, stern truth! A truth that will strike many of you almost as hard as it struck me, back there in the wild hills, by the lone cabin."

"Shock us in a hurry, then, Jay!" nodded Hampton.

"Thus far I had found no game worth wasting a bullet on," persistently ignoring his interrupting friend. "I was beginning to feel the rough tramping just enough to make me think of taking a rest, when I found myself near the Lone Cabin. I don't know what made me press on to the shanty, for I'm not over-fond of the place, mind you. I've heard too many black stories told about it and the old man."

"So have we," audibly murmured Hampton, with a shrug.

Dillon frowned, flashing a glance toward the scoffer.

"Sneer as you like, old fellow, but I know now that the spirit of a murdered man was dragging me to that cabin! I know now why it was I could not turn aside when I tried to do so. I tried it twice, and once got a hundred yards away. But I had to turn and go back—go back to find a murdered man lying on his back in the cabin, with a knife-cut through his left breast—with a bullet-hole in his back!"

The crowd surged back and forth, a low, ominous muttering running from lip to lip. Even George Hampton was grave enough now as he said:

"Who was the man? Any one we know?"

"As well as you know me," was the slow response.

Instinctively each man glanced swiftly around, trying to recall the face of each absent citizen, but apparently without success, though several names were called out hesitatingly.

At each one Dillon shook his head negatively.

"I knew then what that strange tugging meant. I knew then that I had been chosen by the foully murdered man as his avenger. And as I stood over him with bared head, gentlemen, I swore to never know rest until his vile assassin had been run down and dragged to the gallows! That oath I repeat here and now, calling upon each and all of you to bear me witness!"

"Name!" called out Hampton, pressing a little closer to the base of the rock, his strong features hard-set, all scoffing gone now. "Who was the man? Tell us, and count us all in with you in the death-hunt!"

"Who was the man? One of our best and most valued citizens!" Jay Dillon cried, his face flushing, his voice growing almost harsh in its sternness, the great veins beginning to swell on his temples. "One who has done more for Top Notch than any other dozen men among us!"

He ceased abruptly as a sharp ejaculation came from the tall figure between the black and the red man. His flushed face turned white and hard as his glittering eyes met a pair of the same midnight hue.

"Give us a name, if this is not all a fairy tale!" the owner of those eyes cried, moving a pace or two nearer, seemingly unaware how surely those two strong men kept beside him, how curiously they seemed to watch him and his motions rather than those of the gambler, on whom all other eyes were turned just then.

Tracy Unwin he had given his name when arriving at Top Notch, almost a year before this day. From the East, he said, when questioned as to his starting point; but he volunteered no further information. He even seemed to parry curiosity, though this but drew more attention toward him than would have been the case had he spoken out more freely.

Tall, well built, correctly speaking, fairly handsome, and apparently with money enough to "keep him going," Tracy Unwin could not be called popular, even with the better class of citizens. He was too secretive. He was too well satisfied with his own company. He seldom drank, and then barely touching the vile poison which was passed over the bars of the mining-camp. He yielded even this little with poorly disguised disgust, simply to avoid being drawn into a quarrel.

He had not touched a card since first striking camp, so far as the persons most likely to discover were aware. He never joined in the rude practical jokes or boisterous horse-play that goes so far to relieve the dull monotony of mining life. "He was too durned stuck-up!" as the general verdict ran.

Still, Tracy Unwin had made one friend, or acquaintance, of benefit to himself, since striking Top Notch. That was Thompson Jones, who was popularly believed to have a "bonanza" in his claim, "Last Hope."

Tracy Unwin was given charge of the mine, being made a sort of foreman, having control of the few men whom Jones employed to the more thoroughly "develop" his claim, though he had not means enough to properly work it. Like many other lucky prospectors, it was his aim to simply do enough on the claim to prove its richness, then look about for a man or company wealthy enough to buy the claim outright.

This was the young man who started forward to confront Jay Dillon, demanding the name of the murdered man.

"You want to know his name, Tracy Unwin?" slowly demanded Dillon, a reddish glow coming into his eyes as he leaned a little forward on his rocky perch. "You ask me to speak his name—the name of the citizen whom I found with bullet and steel through his heart up there in the hills, in the Lone Cabin? You demand his name?"

"Why not?" with a sudden frown of anger at that peculiar tone. "If you are afraid of being caught in a lie, you should not have been so precise in mentioning the scene of the tragedy—if one there is!"

"If!" with a sudden uplifting of a clinched hand toward heaven. "There has been a tragedy—a crime black as the lowest pits of Tartarus! And I swear to avenge that crime—swear to know no rest until the murder of my friend is bitterly, amply revenged!"

"Nor give us any rest, it seems," sneered Tracy Unwin, falling back a little, folding his arms across his chest, a curl moving his lips.

For a single breath Jay Dillon gazed at the young man, his red lips curling back from the white teeth. Then, with one finger slowly quivering toward the youth, he spoke out, coldly, clearly:

"You want to know the name of the murdered man? You want to know whose spirit dragged me to that lonely hut? Thompson Jones!"

A cry came from the startled crowd, for, strange as it now seemed, not one of those present had even given the owner of the Last Hope a thought while trying to place the victim. But, high above that sound rose the voice of Tracy Unwin, shrill, shaken, full of powerful emotion as he shot forth the words:

"Dead—murdered? Then your hand laid Thompson Jones low in death, you merciless demon!"

He sprang forward as though to grapple with the tall gambler as that fierce accusation left his lips, but, before he could take a second step, Jay Dillon flung up one gloved hand and the two strong men leaped upon Unwin, twisting his arms behind him with practical skill, holding him helpless despite his desperate struggles.

Only for a brief space. Then—

The giant reeled aside, to fall with tangled legs. The stunted Hercules went down on the broad of his back as a steel-like fist took him fairly between the eyes. And a deft movement sent Tracy Unwin back through the scattering crowd, while his rescuer stood between him and the startled gambler on the rock, saying lightly:

"Play fair, whatever you do, gentlemen! Two on one is bad luck—for those who try it on where Timber Doodle has room to strut!"

CHAPTER II.

"LET THE DEAD BEAR WITNESS!"

NEITHER Pitt Bynight nor his shorter fellow, Hod Geary, were men whom a connoisseur would pick out for easy handling, yet on this occasion they were disposed of with such ridiculous ease that the spectators naturally looked for a giant in the being who had so suddenly sprung up as an advocate for fair play. Instead, they saw a pigmy, comparatively speaking—

A man who was rather below than above the average height, slender and graceful in build, almost the exact opposite of what one naturally looks for in "chief" or "champion":—

A man who stood, hands carelessly resting on his hips as he smiled up at Jay Dillon on the rock-point, without giving either of the fallen men a passing glance.

The tall gambler ground a savage curse between his teeth as he noted the downfall of the two roughs who had acted so promptly in obedience to his signal, and a gloved hand whipped forth a revolver, covering that slender figure with the speed and certainty of a dead-shot.

The citizens scattered in almost ludicrous haste at the first symptom of trouble, though many of their number drew weapons as they fell back, ready to play their part when it seemed advisable. And even as they did so, they caught the clear, laughing note of the stranger:

"Go on with your pritty talk, most noble Nimrod. I'll keep peace in the audience if I have to use one half to lick the other moiety with. Go on, and—eh?"

"Who the foul fiend are you?" grated the gambler, his handsome face fairly livid with passion as he covered the bold intruder with his weapon.

Timber Doodle cocked his head a little on one side, gazing up at the enraged sport with comically arched brows, looking the very picture of innocent surprise as a low, mellow laugh bubbled from his lips.

"Looks like I might the wrong end of a target excursion, just now!" he lightly uttered, his arms still akimbo, his fingers making no move toward closing on the pistol butts that lay so near them. "What fly has tickled you, Jay Dillon? If I didn't know you religiously respected the Sabbath, I'd almost think you meant shoot. But—*Lay down, pardner!*"

Pitt Bynight, the Indian-like rough whose long legs had been so adroitly tangled up by Timber Doodle, scrambled to his feet and with a muffled roar of rage sprang toward the little man, bare steel flashing in the sunlight. So swift, so deadly was the rush, that hardly one man out of a hundred could have realized his peril before it was too late to even attempt a defense; but this man was one of a thousand.

His motions so swift that the eye was puzzled to follow them, Timber Doodle closed with the giant, one hand grasping his armed wrist, sending the flashing steel whirling over and over through the sunlight. Another hand sinking out of sight in that jetty beard. Two feet in active motion for a second—then the swarth giant turned in the air and fell on the broad of his back with a force that drove the breath out of his body.

All this in the space of a single breath. All this so swiftly accomplished, that before Jay Dillon, expert though he was admitted to be with the dangerous tools he sported, could regain his aim, Timber Doodle was again facing him; but this time smiling over a level tube.

"Two to one you don't burn powder, pardner!" the little sport mockingly cried over his weapon. "Ten to one you miss my bigness if you are idiot enough to try it on. Twenty to one—"

"I'm the man you want to tackle, Jay Dillon!" cried Tracy Unwin, striding in front of the little bantam, his hands empty but tightly clinched as he frowned at the man who brought the news of Thompson Jones's murder to Top Notch. "I'm the man that accuses you of this foul deed, and—"

A cold, hard laugh parted the lips of the gambler, as he lowered his weapon, though still retaining it in his grip. The angry flush died out of his face, to deepen in his jetty eyes.

"Just as a footpad cries out stop thief!" he uttered, sharply. "But that trick won't save you, my fine fellow! You killed Thompson Jones, and I've sworn to hunt you to the rope for cutting his life short!"

Tracy Unwin started back, turning pale as death itself. He was visibly shaken by this bold accusation. There were those present who jumped to the conclusion that he was guilty, from that very fact.

"I—I killed him?" stammered Unwin, his tones hardly articulate.

"Ay!" with increased vigor. "You murdered him! I stake my reputation on it—I stake my life on it! You are the assassin!"

A choking cry broke from the livid lips of the foreman, and with quivering hands he would have sprung at the throat of the tall gambler, only for the swift interposition of the little sport, who caught his arms and whirled him about, crying clearly, sharply:

"Simmer down, pardner, won't you? I chipped in for a farce, but this begins to smack of tragedy. I don't want to set on you, but—"

"Come to order, gentlemen!" cried George Hampton, leaping up on the rock beside Jay Dillon, one hand grasping the pistol-arm of the gambler, while he shook a business-like weapon toward the excited gathering in the other member. "I call on all white men to aid me in keeping order until we can get at the bottom facts. Drop that, Hod Geary!"

"He chugged me when I wasn't lookin'!" mumbled the red-haired digger, crouching like a squat ape for a leap at the throat of the cool little sport.

"Just salted you a bit for being so fresh, pritty," laughed Timber Doodle over one shoulder. "If you're only mad because you didn't see just how I done it, I'll be only too happy to repeat the dose."

"Look out that we don't pickle you down, my fine fellow," curtly interposed Hampton, flashing a keen, suspicious glance over the stranger. "Who asked for your interference, anyway?"

"That's just what's the matter," smiled Timber Doodle. "I didn't hear any one sing out for me, and I was afraid they wouldn't if I were to wait until the fun was all gobbled up. So—I just helped myself to what came handiest. See?"

"Who and what are you?"

"Timber Doodle, just from the Dismal Swamp," was the prompt response, as the little sport wheeled to confront his inquisitor, with hands resting lightly on his hips, a pleasant smile upon his face. "Just over moulting, and hardly used to my new suit of feathers, as you can see. But I'll improve—I'll improve, if you give me time."

A puzzled look came into the strong face of George Hampton as he closely scrutinized the easy speaker. It was not alone the curious name which the little sport seemed proud of hearing from his own lips. With that he had been familiar from early boyhood, when he first hunted the game woodcock back in the Pennsylvania coverts, where, more often than not, that prized bird is known as "timber doodle."

Lightly, easily, the little sport bore that close scrutiny. He even seemed to invite it, a slight toss of his head tipping back the broad brim of his pearl-gray felt hat, letting the bright sunlight fall fairly upon his face.

A small man, as I have said before; if anything under the mean height of his sex. Slender and graceful in build, his body was well-rounded, his limbs showing more muscle than might have been expected of a man of his size.

Light-brown hair fell to his shoulders in slightly-curling locks. A neatly trimmed pair of mustaches shaded his small, red-lipped mouth. His nose was short, thin-nostriled, slightly curving. His chin rounded like that of a woman when seen in profile, but showing broad and square from the front, with a perpendicular line dividing it. His eyes were medium in size, of a steel-gray hue, keen and bright, but with a quizzical look in them now as he smiled up at George Hampton.

On his head the soft felt hat. Below this, a black velvet sack-coat; white shirt, finely ruffled at the bosom, unconcealed by a vest; cloth trousers, held up by a broad belt of silk webbing, thickly studded with cartridges, and which also served to support a brace of ivory-handled, gold-mounted revolvers, and a pearl-hafted knife; riding-boots of fine leather, spurred at the heels.

"You are a stranger here, and—"

"That's your misfortune, without being my fault," airily interposed Timber Doodle, with a gentle wave of one small hand. "In less than one week from date you'll be ready to take oath you used to steal watermelons and rob orchards with me when we were far too young and innocent to know what cramps or colic meant."

George Hampton laughed shortly, hardly.

"If you live so long, better say! But I'll see you later. Just now there's more important business on hand. Mr. Dillon," turning toward the tall gambler at his side. "You charge Mr. Unwin with murdering our fellow-citizen Thompson Jones?"

"He lies in his throat if he dares repeat that foul charge!" impetuously cried Tracy Unwin, stepping forward a pace, only to be caught by the steel-like fingers of Timber Doodle, who called out:

"That's the last blast from this bugle, pardner, if I have to cork it up myself!" adding in a hurried whisper that only the ears of the accused man could catch: "Will you throw away your last chance, man? Cool down, or that ice-berg sharp will make game, off-hand!"

Jay Dillon hesitated an instant before replying to Hampton. The hot flush died out of his face, leaving his features white and calm. And when he did speak, his tones were slow and measured:

"I'll not lower myself to his level. I'm ready to stand by any words that pass my lips, but I'll not give my enemies a chance to even think that I am trying to shield myself by hurling back the weapons Tracy Unwin has used. He says that I killed Thompson Jones. He has called me a foul assassin. In reply, I say this:

"Let the dead bear witness! Let Tracy Unwin bear me company to the Lone Cabin. Let him give up his weapons as I am ready to give

up mine, while you are investigating this awful crime. If he is *not* the cowardly assassin, let him accept this challenge!"

George Hampton looked at Tracy Unwin, then cast a swift glance over the crowd, noting the almost universal approval written on those hard-set, stern faces.

"That's no more'n fair!" cried out a hoarse voice from the crowd.

"And what's fair is plenty good for us," promptly ejaculated Timber Doodle, who seemed resolved not to allow himself to be long forgotten or overlooked. "Accept the challenge? Why, we just jump at it, like a hungry bull-frog at a fat blue-bottle! Don't we, pard?"

Tracy Unwin bowed his head in silent assent. Better for him, perhaps, had he spoken up with the briskness displayed by his strange champion. The crowd would have felt less like condemning him beforehand.

Something of this seemed to strike the accused, as he caught a low and growing murmur passing around the crowd. A vivid flash filled his dark eyes and he drew his tall figure erect as he glanced swiftly around, noting the ugly, menacing frowns on those rugged faces.

Timber Doodle pressed his arm sharply, but with a frown Tracy Unwin cast his hand off, his voice harsh and unnatural as he said:

"I thank you for what you've done, stranger, but you can't choke me off now. I'm going to have my say—just as that cool devil has had his!"

It was a very faint smile that came into the face of the little sport, but his tones were hearty enough to make ample amends.

"Why not? Ain't we guaranteed fair speech by our glorious constitution? Well, I should smile! Go on, pard. I'll see that these gents do the listening, even if I have to waste powder to keep them all-ears-open!"

If nothing else, this little speech gave Tracy Unwin time to collect his thoughts and steady his nerves, terribly shaken as they had been by the tidings Jay Dillon brought to Top Notch.

Though his face was very pale as he glanced over that frowning crowd, in almost every face of which he could see his condemnation plainly written, the young man did not flinch. Guilty or innocent, he surely did not lack for nerve in the face of a terrible danger.

Jay Dillon made no effort to interfere, smiling faintly as George Hampton warningly touched his arm. He was keen enough to see that something more than mere words would be required to remove the impression his charge had made on the citizens of Top Notch. Keen enough to see that already, without a particle of proof, those stern men had found this "stuck-up" stranger guilty.

"Are you *sure* he killed him, Jay?" muttered Hampton in the gambler's ear. "If not—the young idiot is digging his grave with his own tongue!" he added, gratingly as Tracy Unwin began to speak.

"Gentlemen, you heard what yonder cold-blooded scoundrel said. He brings word that Thompson Jones is dead—foully murdered! He calls on you to help bring the red-handed assassin to justice—he even hints that he would like to play hangman himself!"

"Why not?" growled Pitt Bynight, with a vicious curl of his lips. "Who wouldn't be glad to act in a cause like that? Nobody that wasn't afraid o' the noose himself!"

The swarthy giant was by no means a universal favorite in camp, but a sudden outburst at this point told how closely he had hit the general sentiment; and it was this that made George Hampton mutter those angry words—that made him leap from the rock and stride to the side of the speaker.

"Peace or war, pardner?" softly breathed Timber Doodle, one little hand tapping Hampton on the arm.

There was a cold, dangerous glitter in his gray eyes that lent his query special emphasis, and gave the sturdy citizen a better idea of what the little sport really was than all the careless words that had gone before. It warned him that Timber Doodle was in the game to stay; that Tracy Unwin was going to have fair play if any one man could command it.

Hampton just showed his teeth, then turned and flashed his glance over the dangerously excited gathering, speaking sharply:

"No snap-judgment, friends! Reserve your decision for the actual proofs. Hear the man out, since he wishes to talk. I'm willing to grant him that much, and all of you know that I don't love him any too much."

Cold, stern, Tracy Unwin waited until silence was restored. The little outbreak seemed to have done him good rather than harm, so far as his courage was concerned, for when he spoke again, his tones were more clear, his manner more collected than at first.

"Find the assassin and see whose hands will be more eager to grasp the rope than mine, gentlemen! Why then did I fault Jay Dillon for saying much the same? Simply because, as heaven hears me! I believe he spoke only of the rope of lynch-law, not the noose of justice! Because I firmly believe he thought to rush you on to hang an innocent man without giving

him even the ghost of a chance to clear himself!"

"Meaning yourself, no doubt!" broke in the gambler, sneeringly.

"Dare you look me in the face and take oath to the contrary?"

"You heard my challenge. Go with me to the Lone Cabin and dare the test, as I am more than willing to dare it," was the cold retort.

"Because you feel sure your bloody tracks are covered too well for the truth to be read. Because you feel that your snare is too cunningly set to miss catching the game you have doomed to suffer the penalty due your own dastardly crimes!" impetuously cried Unwin, paying no attention to the warning touch of Timber Doodle.

Jay Dillon smiled coldly, like one well satisfied with the course matters were taking. If he had really set out to hunt Tracy Unwin to the gallows, that young man could hardly have played more fully to suit the gambler's hand.

His deliberate interruption had more than offset the slight impression made by the words of the foreman of the Last Hope. What was really the despairing outburst of a man who feels a deadly snare is tightening about his feet, seemed to every man present to be only the angry recriminations of one who feels his sins have found him out to his eternal undoing. And had a vote been taken just then, hardly a voice would have been lifted for the clearing of Tracy Unwin.

Timber Doodle saw this, as those gray eyes seemed to see everything else, and though even he must have felt that he had espoused a truly desperate cause, he gave no outward evidence that such was a fact. If anything, his voice was clearer, more cheerful than ever as he said:

"And that game is just what we're all burning up to rake from law, too! Where is this solitary abode? Show us the deserted mansion, somebody with a guidebook in his two eyes! Lead on to this vacated ranch—and the sooner the better, say we all of us!"

Jay Dillon leaped down from the point of rocks and paused before George Hampton, turning a brace of revolvers butt-foremost and holding them out as he said, deliberately:

"That shows I'm in dead earnest, at any rate. Will you be as honest, Tracy Unwin?"

"Bet your rubber boots!" briskly cried Timber Doodle, his small hands swiftly passing over the person of the foreman. "Never let a bluff like that—well, I am confounded!" starting back with a half-puzzled, half-reproachful glance into that cold, white face.

The ghost of a smile flitted over the features of the foreman, as he quietly uttered:

"I never carry weapons. I could never understand why an honest man should go about armed like a desperado."

"And I honor you for the sentiment—hang me by the heels to dry in the sun if I don't!" cried Timber Doodle, striding forward and grasping the young man's hand. "I'd throw away my guns myself, if I was half as big as a pint of cider; but I've got to have some means of striking an average, you see. Got to—or lose my number."

Jay Dillon smiled icily as he said:

"I carry both knife and guns. I am not ashamed of it. When I lay a man out, I don't have to hide the tools, either!"

"Be a fool if you did," laughed Timber Doodle. "Two knives make the same sort of cut, and in these days of fixed ammunition and machine-made guns, bullets have mighty little to say in murder cases."

"By which you mean to insinuate?"

"Let the dead bear witness, to quote no less an authority than yourself, pardner," was the laughing response. "He's got to; for the bullet that killed him or the knife that made doubly sure, will never make us any the wiser."

Again George Hampton, always cool, but doubly so in an emergency, interfered to keep the peace which bade fair to be broken by these keen tongues and cool heads.

"We are wasting valuable time in these idle bickerings, gentlemen, and letting the trail of the murderer grow cold. If Mr. Unwin will pledge his word that he bears no weapons concealed about his person, we'll try to get down to sober business."

"I have no weapons about me," was the cold response.

"And I have publicly surrendered mine," said Jay Dillon.

"That was hardly necessary, for if either of you are guilty of murdering Thompson Jones, bullet and steel couldn't save you from us all," grimly uttered George Hampton.

Little more time was cut to waste, for all were eager to have the matter settled in some shape or manner. Even Timber Doodle, though he still kept close beside the young man whose cause he had seen fit to champion against such long odds, was content to give his nimble tongue a little rest. What few words he did utter, were principally directed to Tracy Unwin; but there was not much in them to satisfy the curiosity of either Pitt Bynight or Hod Geary, both of whom hung at the heels of the foreman and his adviser.

There were few saddle-animals in Top Notch,

and the region in which the Lone Cabin was to be found, afforded a very poor field for equestrian exercise; consequently the trip was made on foot.

The way was long, and the traveling difficult, owing to the broken nature of the ground; but never a man in all the company—and pretty much all of Top Notch turned out to see the matter through—uttered a groan or grumble. What each one expected to witness at the end of that toilsome trip kept them from feeling fatigue, from noticing the scorching sun that beat down upon them, its power doubled by refraction amid those bare rocks.

Of the two men who were the central figures, Tracy Unwin seemed the most composed. Jay Dillon was strangely, almost feverishly talkative, for one who was ordinarily taciturn and reserved. More than once his handsome face flushed hotly or turned paler, as he caught a half-laughing light in the gray eyes of Timber Doodle. More than once he muttered a grating curse on this cool hand who had so unexpectedly taken part in the game he was playing.

But as the Lone Cabin was neared, even Jay Dillon grew grave and silent. And when it came fairly in sight, each member of the little party slackened his pace, seemingly waiting for another to take the lead.

Then, his eyes flashing vividly, Jay Dillon sprang forward, turning so as to bring the entire party before him, his back to the cabin.

"Gentlemen," he cried, his voice ringing out clear and icy, "I ask you to listen to one word before you go further. That is—keep yonder man under your weapons—shoot him down like a dog if he tries to make his escape!" and his quivering forefinger pointed direct at Tracy Unwin as he spoke.

"Let the gang watch him, and I'll watch you, pardner," coolly interjected Timber Doodle, significantly tapping a pistol-butt.

Jay Dillon flashed a vicious glance at the bold speaker, but paid him no further notice just then. Sharp and clear his voice rung out:

"You heard Tracy Unwin accuse me of killing Thompson Jones, and you heard me challenge him to submit to the evidence which the dead in yonder cabin is ready to bear. You heard him boast of never bearing deadly weapons. Yet in yonder lies the corpse of our honored citizen, his breast pierced by a knife-thrust, a bullet-hole in his back; and I swear that Tracy Unwin fired the one and wielded the other!"

"And you lie in your throat when you utter the charge!" impetuously cried the accused, his tall form drawn proudly erect.

Jay Dillon laughed—an icy-cold, curdling sound under the circumstances. His face showed white as that of a corpse, but his jetty eyes gleamed with a reddish luster.

"Once more I dare you to the ordeal, Tracy Unwin! Once more I call on you to submit to the evidence borne by the dead man whose life-thread was severed by your evil hands! Will you stand by the testimony which Thompson Jones gives?"

"Unless that evidence is twisted awry by your malicious art, *yes*!"

A short hard laugh broke from the red lips of the tall gambler.

"You are witnesses, gentlemen, one and all! And now—listen to what more I discovered when the spirit of our murdered citizen dragged me unmercifully to this lone spot—listen to what I found, traced by the finger of Thompson Jones, dipped in his own heart's blood!"

"On the floor I found traced these words: '*Murdered—by Tracy Unwin!*'"

Of all those who heard these words, Timber Doodle alone seemed able to move and act. While the others started back a little from the man thus terribly branded, the little sport thus strode swiftly to the side of the tall gambler, catching the right hand which was elevated as if to lend emphasis to his accusation, bringing it down and tearing off the kid glove at the same instant. One quick glance at the bared fingers, then Timber Doodle stepped back, saying blandly:

"When did you wash your hands last, pardner? Used soap, I reckon?"

It was an audacious move, but it fell flat. Insinuations were not enough to change the tide, and though the gambler flushed hotly, he was cool and keen enough to see this. In place of a curse, he spoke out sharply as Timber Doodle strode toward the door of the cabin.

"Hold, you scoundrel! Shoot him down, men, if he tries to destroy the evidence left by Thompson Jones!"

Timber Doodle smiled over his shoulder at the hastily leveled pistols, but flung wide the door, glancing in, then turned in disgust.

"What are you trying to give us, anyhow, pardner?"

Jay Dillon sprang forward, casting a wild glance into the cabin, then staggering back with a gasping, choking cry of dismay.

CHAPTER III.

STEEL-FACE MAKES HIMSELF AGREEABLE.
THE afternoon sun was blazing hot. The coach—wayworn relic of more prosperous days and a far more pretentious route—was heavy

enough, despite its light freight, to sink deep into the sandy soil of Ten Mile Bottom. The four mules were not shirking their work, though they kept the tugs tightened much as a lazy man will keep on walking rather than make the mental effort necessary to call a halt.

Overland Jeemes drooped lazily on the box-seat, his grizzled lashes veiling his gray eyes, his head nodding in time with the sleepy swaying of "the ark" on its massive rawhide springs. Dreaming, perhaps, of those long-vanished days—

"The days of old, the days of gold,
The days of old '49!"

The very atmosphere seemed full of languor, of sleepiness, inside the dingy old coach as well as without. And as the stage rolled leisurely along the sandy, almost level road, Mabel Carter leaned her head back in one corner and closed her weary eyes.

For days she had been journeying toward the setting sun, for the most part far too anxious of mind and impatient of heart to take anything like her ordinary rest. Now, on their third day's experience of staging through the wild recesses where, as yet, the iron horse had failed to make its way, slumber came upon her as she leaned back in her corner, thinking, thinking—

Overland Jeemes had but three passengers this trip; all "insides" and all "booked through" to the end of his "run."

"A petticoat, a ban'box, an' a deck o' keerds!" as he mentally summed them up, with accompanying notes of admiration, of contempt, of strong dislike which was tinged unconsciously with envy.

For more than one mile after pulling out of the station where he took up his run, Overland Jeemes could not help contrasting his own fate with that of the "deck o' keerds," alias "Steel-face," christened Lee Facer; gambler, speculator, confidence man in general.

"He never dirtied them velvet han's o' his'n with a honest stroke o' hard work in the hull course o' his 'zistance—he never *did*!" the driver mumbled behind his grizzled beard. "Yit look at him, an' then sling your peepers this way—look at *me*! He kin throw away more money in a night than I kin collar in a year. He'll shove up what I call a month's wages jest as a blind, an' never think it wu'th while to take a squint at his keerds fu'st. He'll bluff a strong hand off with nary a pa'r or a bobtail, rakin' down what'd make me rich fer life, an' that ice-face o' his'n never phase a line! Durn the oneven luck! What's the use o' livin', anyway?"

It was evident that Overland Jeemes knew one of his passengers, by sight as well as by reputation, for Lee Facer was all that he said, and much more. A born adventurer. A man who lived by his wits, backed by a nerve and coolness that have been seldom equaled. A being wholly without mercy, without conscience; a man without a heart. One whose hand had been reddened with the life-blood of more victims than one, yet whose cunning was such that the grip of the law had never fairly closed upon him.

"Steel-face" he was generally known among his own class, but one who only saw him as now, in repose and apparently off guard, that title would have seemed greatly misplaced.

His age might have been anything from forty to sixty years, for, though his close-trimmed hair was almost white, his cheeks were smooth and his broad brow free from wrinkles. He wore no beard; he needed no such mask, convenient though his brother vultures might find it.

Tall, slender, erect in carriage; a grave, almost austere face, narrow at the base, but broadening into a noble forehead, the full temples overhanging steady, cold blue eyes. The face which one instinctively gives to a deep thinker, to a profound student, to a preacher of The Word—anything but a gambler and common swindler.

Lee Facer dressed in character, too, though without exaggeration. His somber garb aided the imagination in classing him with the elect, yet there was nothing about it to base a charge of intended fraud upon when his actual profession became known. There is no embargo on black broadcloth or white ties.

Steel-face had spoken but little since that journey began, seeming better content to enjoy his own serious musings as he sat opposite the two passengers who shared with him the rude accommodations. His grave glance rarely touched the faces of brother and sister, yet he was carefully studying them, for all that.

A true bird of prey, Lee Facer was attracted by the dress and manner of Howard Carter. A man who wore diamonds on a trip through these wilds, must be well supplied with money.

"A ban'box," Overland Jeemes had mentally dubbed Howard Carter, and from his standpoint, the worthy driver was not far out of the way.

Of the *genus* dude, without disguise; but one of the higher varieties of that hot-house family.

Short in stature, slender and graceful in build, with each member in just proportion. With a blonde beauty that was more feminine than manly; with large eyes of heavenly blue, usu-

ally filled with a languid indifference, but capable of flashing with earnest fire in an emergency. A slight mustache graced his upper lip, but his cheeks were as smooth and velvety as those of an infant.

"She's the best man of the two!" thought Lee Facer, with a veiled glance at the beautiful face of the maiden, revealed as she pushed her veil aside to catch a breath of fresh air. "She'd give a man a tough tussle, but I can twist that dude around my little finger!"

Lee Facer was a true bird of prey, ever on the lookout for a choice morsel, but it was not altogether this that led him to abandon the important business which had carried him to Silver City. He learned that these two travelers were going on to Gold Hills, and there was something in the registered names that startled him. Just why, he vainly asked himself. The name was common enough; he had met with it many times before this. He could not explain why it had such a deep interest for him, try as he might. Yet something seemed to warn him that deep interests were connected with them; and it was this superstitious feeling that, even more than a hope of pigeon-plucking, led him to taking passage in the old coach for Gold Hills.

Howard Carter indolently summed up their fellow-passenger, then gave him no further thought. He was new to the curious West and its still more curious characters, or he might have suspected the wolf in sheep's clothing.

Like his sister, he felt the somnolent influence of the warm air, aided by the gentle, joltless passage of the stage over that sandy level, and like her he was on the point of yielding to slumber, when the Facer aroused him with a surprise.

"My dear sir," leaning forward and speaking softly, with a half-fearful glance toward the veiled face of the sleeping beauty.

Howard Carter opened wide his big blue eyes, smiling faintly as he saw what this clerical-looking traveler was so jealously guarding in his hands; a wicker-covered flask, from which he was slipping a silver cup.

"If you think that lady would object to—"

"My sister never indulges, thank you," smiled the little dude, then laughing softly at the look of utter horror which overspread that paternal face.

"My dear sir!" with a gasp of painful confusion. "I never—"

"But I do—occasionally," smiled Carter, accepting the flask with a bow, daintily unscrewing the top and pouring out a portion of the oily liquor. "Ugh!" with a little shiver as he passed the flask back to its owner. "That never saw water, I'll go bail!"

"Not a headache in a cask of it, my dear sir," smiled Steel-face, duplicating the action, smacking his lips over the dose.

Howard smiled quizzically as his languid eyes roamed over the somber garb of his opposite. This was a rather peculiar clergyman!

Lee Facer read his thoughts aright, and shook his head, smilingly.

"I am a lawyer, not a minister of the Gospel. More than one has fallen into the same mistake, but I feel in duty bound to wear this suit, in memory of a very dear friend, at least until the conventional period of mourning is passed."

Howard Carter flushed slightly, murmuring his regrets, but Steel-face gently cut him short.

"Never mention it, my dear sir. I should not, only I could not see a gentleman thinking ill of the cloth. I'm not any too religious myself, but I respect the profession—respect it deeply. As long as the lady—your sister, I believe?"

Howard bowed with a sudden coolness.

"Until the lady fell asleep, I fought against yielding, lest I offend her natural delicacy. Yet it was very hard—not that I am a hard drinker, for I don't even like the poison; but my health requires it, and I obey the orders of my physician."

"Such good liquor needs no apology," laughed Carter, softly.

"It is good—precious as diamond-dust out in these barbarous regions, where each sip of water is another nail in the coffin of a dyspeptic. I never venture to travel without a good supply. I believe I owe my fair health to that brandy alone! You hardly tasted it; do take a fair sip if only to give me your candid opinion as to its merits."

Too indolent to refuse a request so earnest, Howard Carter again sampled the contents of the wicker flask, finding it really admirable as he permitted the powerful poison to slip slowly over his tongue.

He was by no means a hard drinker, having little taste for liquor of even the mildest sort. Of course he could not tell how powerful this brandy really was: so oily, so smooth, so free from the scorching fire that adulterated drink contains. It brought tears to his eyes, but it left a grateful sensation in his throat and stomach.

His praises, though so softly uttered, were sufficiently strong to highly please his tempter, who knew that his task would be made easier by that powerful poison.

In soft, guarded tones, so as not to disturb the slumbers of Mabel Carter, the pretended lawyer told what had brought him into that benighted

region; touched lightly on the important interests which held him in that part of the country, greatly against his will. In short, he apparently turned himself inside-out for free inspection, concealing nothing. And all this so naturally that, his brain beginning to swim a little under the fumes of the brandy, Howard Carter lost much of his customary reserve when in company with strangers.

And when Steel-face began to insinuate rather than ask questions, the young man was quite ready to meet his advances. Why not? This fellow traveler was a gentleman and a scholar.

"You are going beyond Gold Hills, of course?" ventured Steel-face. "No one goes there to stay. The name is by far the best portion of the camp; and even that is a fraud on the face of it!"

"We stop over at Gold Hills, I believe," hesitated Carter, with a side glance toward his sister, as though he was doubting what she might think of his admitting even this much to a stranger.

"As I do—how fortunate!" with a little sigh of pleasure, followed by a soft laugh that was half-embarrassed. "You see, it is not every day that one can find a gentleman to associate with, in these benighted regions. Am I too presumptuous?"

"Say too kind, rather," bowed the little dude.

"Call it a stand-off, then," laughed Steel-face, more easily. "And after all, the advantage may not be altogether one-sided. I know pretty much every person of any importance in these parts. I have made a careful study of mining matters, and if you think of investing—"

Howard Carter shook his head, smiling faintly.

"I prefer my gold and silver already coined."

"Or if you are traveling simply for pleasure, I can direct you to all the points of interest, and—not hit it yet?" with a comical frown of perplexity.

Howard Carter flushed just a trifle, and his big eyes dropped for an instant before that gaze. Even with the fumes of that brandy confusing his brain, he felt that he was acting far from wisely in saying more. And yet—what harm could it do?

"You know a place called Top Notch?" he asked, after a pause.

"Even better than I do Gold Hills," was the prompt response. "In fact, I make that my headquarters while engaged in this quarter. You are thinking of stopping at Top Notch?"

"We will visit the place, at any rate. Do you know anything of a mine at or near Top Notch, called the Last Hope?"

Steel-face dropped his gray lashes for a moment, but not a muscle altered, not the slightest change showed how hard this question hit him. And after a brief space spent in thought he slowly replied:

"A mine—developed? being operated?"

Howard Carter hesitated for a little, his smooth brow wrinkling.

"I am not sure—I can't speak with certainty. I know mighty little about such matters, but I was given the impression that such a mine was in existence, and that it was a veritable bonanza, too!"

Steel-face looked into his face, almost pityingly, as he murmured:

"Surely you haven't been buying a pig in a poke? Excuse me," with an embarrassed laugh, one white hand passing swiftly over his whiter face. "I should have said, I trust you have not been making any investments in mining-claims without first thoroughly investigating the matter? If not in person, through a trusty agent?"

"I have paid out no money, as yet," was the slow response.

"Then it is not too late!" with a sigh of relief. "Why, my dear fellow, the hills are full of 'em! Meaning mines and claims and lodes and ledges. Each one with a grand name—and little else to back it! Each one bound to overshadow all others. Each and every one full and running over with ore so precious as to be ready for coining without further labor than packing it to one of the mints!"

"And you class this Last Hope with these wild-cat claims?"

Lee Facer flung out one hand with a shrug of his shoulders.

"All I say is that if I ever heard of the claim, it has slipped my memory; and I seldom forget anything really worth remembering."

"But a friend wrote me that it promised big things—that there was a fortune already in sight!" persisted Carter.

"Then my memory must be at fault," bowed Lee Facer, with a dry smile flickering across his face. "Your friend would hardly send you false information. Still there are so many of these names and titles; if I might ask the name of this friend, perhaps that would give me the clew I now lack."

For one moment Steel-face regretted having spoken those words, for he saw that they troubled the little dude. Inwardly he cursed his precipitancy, but his icy mask showed nothing of all this.

"Did you ever hear of or meet a man called

Anson Carter?" abruptly asked Howard, gazing keenly into that inscrutable countenance.

"Never, to my knowledge," was the prompt response. "Any relative of yours? Pardon me," with a bow. "The name being like yours, led me to speak before thinking."

"Only my father," was the curt reply, as Howard Carter changed his position.

Was it only chance that his elbow struck against the arm of his sister with force sufficient to break her slumber?

Lee Facer could not answer this mental query quite to his own satisfaction, but accepting the inevitable, he sunk back on his seat and resumed his placid gaze out through the open window.

After all, the conversation could not have lasted much longer, for the Ten Mile Bottom was crossed, and as the lumbering old coach entered the hills, its heavy jolting and sea-sick swaying would forbid easy interchange of words.

Just the ghost of a smile flitted across the cold face of the gambler as he saw Howard Carter draw his hat over his eyes and brace himself in one corner, like one trying to sleep. He knew that this was not the real reason. He knew that the little dude began to feel he had grown entirely too confidential on short acquaintance, and was thus fortifying himself against further temptation.

"Maybe he thinks I'll try to pump the girl, instead," mentally uttered Steel-face. "Not so green, my little dude! I've gotten almost all I want out of you, and I can wait for the rest. We both lay over in Gold Hills to-night, and—What in the foul fiend's name can he want with the Last Hope?"

Calm and placid outwardly, Steel-face puzzled his crafty brain over this annoying enigma all the rest of the way to Gold Hills, but without reaching any satisfactory conclusion. He had told the truth, so far as he knew, when he said he had never met a man named Anson Carter. But why had the little dude flung that query at his head, so abruptly? What connection was there between the Last Hope and Anson Carter?

"None, that I know of! If he had said 'Thompson Jones, now! Can the old man be the friend he spoke of—the friend who wrote him about the Last Hope? Hardly that. Else the little rascal wouldn't need to ask me what and where the claim was!'

"Can it be that Jones has sold the claim already? And to this runt? Or is he an agent—bahl!" with an inward curse of impatience as he drove the troublesome subject from his brain. "I'll get at the bottom facts before this night is old, else I've lost my cunning. The little fool has a tooth for good liquor, wry faces as he makes up in swallowing it. I'll try him with a few more doses, and—"

This time Steel-face succeeded in banishing the theme, and bracing himself in the forward corner of the stage, he closed his eyes and gave himself up to such rest as he could snatch between jolts and bumps.

The sun had set and darkness had settled over the rugged mountains as the stage entered Gold Hills, very nearly on time. And when Overland Jeemes drew up with a feeble flourish before the door of the "Ten Stamp Hotel," it was Lee Facer who opened the door and politely aided Mabel Carter to alight, then cordially said to her brother:

"Welcome to Gold Hills, my dear sir! I'll show you right into the one waiting-room, then send the landlord to you. A word from me won't do you any harm with good Ebenezer Flick."

"You are very kind," bowed the little dude, feeling half-ashamed of his recent suspicions.

"Never mention it—it costs me nothing," with a genial smile, as he led the way up the broad steps to the hotel. "Of course a lady would not like to enter such a den as that," with a side nod toward the brightly-lighted room, office and bar and lounging-place combined, where a dozen or more rough-clad fellows were turning from their glasses to the door.

They were too late to catch more than a glimpse of the three passengers, however, for Lee Facer led the way in at a side-door, leaving brother and sister in the dingy, poorly-lighted room adjoining the long dining-room.

He passed direct into the office, striding up to a fat, bald, jolly-seeming man who was stowing away empty glasses and half-filled bottles with clumsy haste, muttering direful curses on the head of the wretch who had deserted his post behind the bar just when his aid was needed the most.

"And mebbe passengers cussin' the ole man fer—Hellow!" with a sudden start as Steel-face clapped him on the back with one cold hand. "Jest come in—an' the rest o' the pilgrims? Durn that Tom—"

"There are two guests in yonder, Ebenezer," coldly interposed the icy sport. "Go 'tend to them. Give them the best your shebang affords, or I'll take the trouble to ask your reasons why. Vamoose!"

"Certainly; any friends o' yours shell—"

Bold Ebenezer waddled away, and the conclusion of his sentence was lost to even the keen ears of Lee Facer. Forgotten, too, was the fat

host, for a rough-clad fellow brushed past the gambler, hissing a word in his ear that immediately drew the other in his wake out of the room.

Under the starlight Lee Facer quickly caught up with the man, who cast a keen, wary glance about them as he answered that low call.

"Word from the boss," he muttered, in tones barely loud enough to reach the keen ears of the gambler. "Writ a note an' told me to kerry it on to Silver City, whar I'd meet you. Was goin' on in the mornin', but reckon this 'll do jest as well."

Steel-face caught the note from the hairy paw and thrust it into his breast-pocket.

"Anything gone wrong at Top Notch?"

"Not as I knows of. Boss seemed turribly 'cited 'bout somethin', though, when he told me to ketch you in the biggest hurry I could. He never told me *why*—an' I fergot to ax!" with a low, grim laugh as though he found something comical in the idea thus conveyed.

"All right. I'll go to my room and see what is in the wind. You hang around here, where I'll know where to look for you, in case there should be work to do to-night. Don't leave the house, mind."

"I kin take a drink or two, cain't I, to kill the waitin'?"

"Just so you don't get too drunk for work if needed."

"Over jest one bar?" reproachfully muttered the ruffian.

Steel-face made no reply, but turning on his heel, he strode back to the hotel, taking a half-burned candle from behind the bar and at once proceeding up-stairs to the room which he claimed as his own. He entered, turning the key in its lock, placing the candle on a stool at the head of the narrow bed, then tearing open the sealed envelope so unexpectedly received.

The sheet of paper which he unfolded was covered closely with bold, clear writing, and his keen eyes glanced swiftly over the lines, until the signature was reached. Only to begin again, reading slowly, carefully, like a man who wishes to read between the lines.

Frowning darkly, Steel-face refolded the letter and held one corner to the lighted candle, scowling more and more deeply as he watched the paper slowly burn to ashes. He burned the envelope afterward, scattering the gray ashes with a vicious thrust of his foot.

Staring at the faint marks left behind on the boards, he supported his chin on his hands, his strong white teeth gnawing at his nails. He suffered the mask to fall from his face now that he was alone, and if Howard Carter could have seen him then, he would hardly have taken him for a minister of the gospel. More like a demon of evil!

"I felt it, even then!" he muttered, barely above his breath. "Something told me I must follow that cursed dude and his dainty sister! I knew there was mischief ahead—but I never dreamed that it would or could assume such shape as this!"

He rose from the bed, shaking himself like a dog fresh from the water. The effect was almost magical. He was once more Steel-face, with never a trace of that savage passion left behind.

He extinguished the candle, left the room, locking the door behind him and taking the key along. He descended the stairs, stepping aside at the foot to make way for his fellow passengers whom fat Ebenezer himself was escorting to their chambers.

There was a bland, almost paternal smile upon his thin face as he bowed low before Mabel Carter, and his voice was music itself as he spoke to her brother:

"We will meet at table, I trust? We deserve a good meal after our long ride, and Father Flick can surprise you in that line, if he does live in a heathen country."

"I will meet you shortly; my sister is too fatigued, I believe, to leave her room this evening."

"May she enjoy a good night's rest," bowed Steel-face, turning away as Howard followed his sister up-stairs.

Lee Facer passed through the dining-room and into the office, finding the fellow who brought him that disturbing letter at the bar, apparently hugely enjoying the liquor which the now-present Tom supplied.

Not a word was spoken by either, but a swift glance told the ruffian that he was needed, and a few moments after Steel-face passed out at the front door, he was followed by the rough, who soon overtook him.

"You wanted me, boss?"

"Yes; there's work for you to do to-night."

CHAPTER IV.

NIBBLING AT THE BAIT.

"THAT'S jest what I'm here fer," was the prompt response. "The boss said I was to hold myself at your say-so, an' obey you jest as I would him ef he filled your boots. P'int out what you want done, an' ef it don't lay too 'way-up fer me, I'll git thar."

"You'll not be the loser when settlin'-day comes, Garl."

"That's with the boss an' me, you understand."

A sound that might have passed for a laugh parted the lips of the gambler, and the words followed:

"You don't like me, Garl Megilp. Still, an approving word from my lips will do you no particular harm."

"A squar' report to the boss o' how I do my work is all I ax or will take from you, Lee Facer," was the grave response. "Why should I like you? Thar's a bloody grave atween us!"

"Still harping on that forgotten tragedy?" with a frank sneer in voice and on lips.

"Not forgotten by me," with slow emphasis.

"Yet you haven't tried to drop me with a blue pill? You never tried to measure my ribs with the good blade you carry! What good is such a memory, Garl Megilp?" sneered the tall gambler.

"Beca'se the pard you turned toes-up was fu'st to begin the row. Beca'se you hed to kill him or be killed your own self."

"You can do me so much justice, then?"

"Why not, sense it's the sober truth?"

"Yet you hold a burning grudge. You refuse to accept a favor at my hands. You will not even allow me to speak a good word to the man who, in this case at least, is my boss as well as yours. Don't it look just a little like suicide for me to even think of setting you to work on a case as important as this, knowing all this, Garl Megilp?"

Lee Facer bent forward and gazed keenly into that bearded face by the light of the brilliant stars above. There was no flinching, no signs of fear or confusion as the rough made reply:

"Ef the work was all for you, mebbe it would be foolish. Ef it wasn't that the boss sent me here, biddin' me do your will clean up to the hilt, it wouldn't be the act of a wise man. But sense I'm workin' by his orders, you kin trust me like you'd trust your own self. Anyway, as fur as the little wit I've got kin kerry me."

Slowly, almost painfully came these words. Steel-face keenly watched the rough, nodding his head with a short, satisfied laugh as the last word crossed his lips.

"I'll not task you too heavily, Garl, never fear."

"I'm open to do what I kin, slow or quick, as the case calls fer. From the way you slung me the wink, I took it to be the last, but I reckon I was mistook."

Steel-face smiled grimly as he listened to this thinly-veiled reproof.

"I don't consider the time wasted, dear fellow," with something like cordiality in his smooth, cold tones. "I know you are a mighty good man, and true as steel to those you trust; but I also knew that you had no love for me, and I wanted to find out just how far I might count on you in a tight place. I know, now. And I wouldn't ask for a better tool to carry out the scheme I have in view."

"The boss is into it, of course?"

Steel-face smiled grimly at the veiled suspicion.

"He is head and front of it, my dear fellow. I am only one of his tools, ranking simply alongside yourself."

"Then, as I said before, you kin count on me to the last drop."

Steel-face stood for a brief space in silence, staring afar off at vacancy, pinching his thin lip between thumb and forefinger. Like a mask of stone his white face showed in the starlight, and though Garl Megilp viewed it furtively through his shaggy brows as he stood in stolid waiting, he failed to read there aught of the busy workings of the crafty brain within.

From the hotel behind them came the subdued sounds of coarse voices. Then a dull-toned bell rung out the call to supper, only the first notes audible above the heavy trampling and thumping of cowhide boots as hungry diggers rushed to the board.

Steel-face gave a start at the sounds, and turned his white face toward his companion.

"Watch my signal, and follow me to my chamber after supper, Garl," he said, then strode back to the hotel.

It was not that he was so hungry, though Steel-face was no dyspeptic. He remembered that Howard Carter had promised to meet him at table, and he had especial reasons for keeping on the best of terms with the little dude.

A grim smile curled his lips as he thought of the reception this "curled darling" would be apt to meet with at the hands of the rough customers who patronized the Ten Stamp tables.

"Under my wing he'll be safe enough, but alone—they'd pluck his fine feathers in a holy second!"

Lee Facer was just in time to meet Howard Carter at the foot of the stairs, and smilingly gripped his soft hand.

"Shall we join the rush, my dear fellow, or would you prefer having a separate table?"

"In Rome, you know," smiled the other. "This is not my first meal with the animals, remember. Yet I'm still on deck!"

Little in the words themselves, but they were enough to chase that bland smile from the face of the gambler. He began to realize that there

might be genuine stuff underlying this dudish exterior, after all.

He was still further convinced of this fact as he watched Howard Carter in the dining-room.

Busy as the guests were with the plentiful viands, they had time to note the last arrival, and to send a buzz of comments from one end of the room to the other. Hardly complimentary, and a little too pointed for comfort of mind; but the little dude showed a coolness that would not have disgraced his companion, leisurely surveying the rude jesters through his gold-rimmed eyeglasses as he deliberately observed:

"Curious study, one's fellow-man! Curious, too, that the further West one goes the more perfect becomes the animal. Another stage, and I'll not be surprised to find curly tails to supplement the grunts I see are not lacking here!"

"We're rough outside, sure enough," quickly interposed Steel-face, taking care that his words should be plain enough for all to catch in that room. "But you'll look at these gentlemen with different eyes after I have introduced you to them as my particular friend."

He sharply emphasized the last words, and clinched his meaning with the cold yet glowing gaze which he cast around the room. Then he seated both himself and newly-made friend, a faint smile showing his belief that his purpose was accomplished.

There may have been sour, ugly glances, but there were no more rude jests bandied back and forth. The men present knew Steel-face far too well for that. He was but a single man of course; yet had he a score of lives he could not have been more of a power in that section.

There was little conversation between the two men, and not many minutes were spent at the table. In guarded tones Lee Facer asked after the lady, and was assured that she would not be neglected.

"I have asked the landlord to prepare a lunch, which I will take up to her myself," added the brother. "She needs sleep more than anything else."

"You look bright enough, I'm happy to note."

"There's hardly enough of me to get tired," laughed the other.

"Precious goods—you know the rest," bowed Steel-face, with a smile that blunted the too fulsome compliment. "Pardon me, won't you? I was thinking of what you flung out a bit ago; it's hardly healthy to utter the truth at all times. As my friend, you are safe enough from insult, I reckon, but—if you think of taking a stroll through Gold Hills, I trust you will permit me to bear you company?"

"As a guardian?" faintly smiled the little dude.

"As a friend, if I may claim the title on short acquaintance," was the swift rejoinder.

"That is more flattering, and I accept the amendment," laughed Carter, pushing back his chair and rising to his feet. "I will look for you in the office—say in an hour from now?"

"That will suit me admirably."

Steel-face waited at the table until Howard Carter disappeared from the room, then caught the eye of Garl Megilp. A look told that worthy to follow, and a minute later the two men were in the chamber where Steel-face read the letter signed with the name of Jay Dillon.

"You saw the young fellow with me, below?" asked Facer, as he dropped on the foot of the bed.

"An' hearn him, too!" with a faint grin. "Grittier then his bigness, or a mighty fool, which comes nigher his looks. Hinted the boys was hogs, all but the curly tails! They'd 'n' smoked his bacon in a holy hurry ef you hedn't slung out a hint that he was under your wing."

"I called him friend, but not because I'm dead in love with the little popinjay," frowned Steel-face. "Do you know who he is?"

"I will when you tell me."

"He's one of those mentioned in the letter you brought me from the chief. The other is his sister, now on this same floor."

"That letter was sealed when I tucked it, an' still sealed when I slipped it in your han', boss."

"In other words, you want to know what Jay Dillon wrote about them?"

"Ef it comes in the way o' business; not un-less."

"You know that the chief is playing for a big stake, though?"

"He never told me so," was the cold response.

"But you must have suspected as much, and if not, you know it now. In that letter, the chief bade me keep both eyes open for a brother and sister who are coming this way; who would probably travel under the name of Carter; whose destination was either Gold Hills or Top Notch."

"He could give me no clearer description, saying that I must play my hand the best I could with the faint clew he thus gave me. By good luck I've caught sight of the hand I have to beat!"

A puzzled look came into the hard face of Garl Megilp.

"The boss told me to find you as quick as I

could, but he said it would be in time ef I didn't ketch you up short of a week. Yit I only left Top Notch this mornin'!"

"You think I have made a mistake in the game?"

"I didn't say so, boss."

"I know I am on the right trail, though the chief, in his note, led me to infer that he counted on at least one week's grace. These two beauties must have started before he calculated."

"It ain't fer me to say," coldly uttered Garl Megilp. "The boss told me to report to you, an' to do the work you set me, jest as I would foller out his own orders. That let's me out, ef you're satisfied. What part am I to play?"

"The responsibility is mine, of course, and I'm willing to accept it. Your part? Wait one moment."

His broad brow wrinkled heavily. His gray eyes contracted their pupils until they were mere specks, though glittering like the tiny eyes of an enraged serpent in coil to strike a death-blow. His white teeth gnawed at his nails almost savagely.

Only for a few minutes. Time was precious, and Steel-face owned a ready brain. Looking at Garl Megilp, he uttered:

"This dude asked me about a man called Anson Carter, and I could see a deep interest in his big eyes as he waited for my answer. You have traveled considerable, and must have met some one of that name?"

"I kin almost remember him, boss," with a faint smile.

"It was not very recently, nor just in this section. It was further along the Coast Range, I think. Anson Carter—and he had a mine, or a claim, called Last Hope. You remember this, because there is a claim near Top Notch by the same title, owned by one Thompson Jones."

"Which sets me to talkin' 'bout my old pard Carter?"

Steel-face hesitated, frowning darkly for a brief space. Then:

"It's risky, but I reckon it will have to serve. Yes; you were led in this direction by a hope that the owner of this new Last Hope might turn out to be the pard you lost years ago. But you are sadly disappointed in this hope. You have seen the owner of the Top Notch Last Hope, and he fails to fill the bill. The change of name might easily be accounted for, but the man himself is different."

"Which I've bin thar to see. An' ef I want, I kin draw a word-pictur' of old Jones?"

"I see no objection to that," slowly. "What the little dude learns to-night will hardly hurt the game of the chief."

"Then thar's more behind?" quickly asked Garl Megilp.

"Of course. How many boys can you pick up in town with ready hands and no tongues?"

"In one hour, a dozen."

"Two will be enough, besides yourself. Come closer, and listen."

With bowed head, Garl Megilp listened to the rapid words which Steel-face poured into his ear.

"First, make sure of your two men. Pick them with as much care as though you were playing with your own life for a stake. See that they fully understand what they are expected to do, then settle down yourself in Dimple Dick's rum-hole. Wait there until you see me bring this pestiferous little dude in. By the way, it might be as well to have your two men with you; you can be talking over your disappointment in not finding your old pard."

"They'll be thar when wanted, boss."

"I'll shake the critter, somehow, and your two men will go outside, ready for work. When the dude comes out they'll—"

Steel-face ceased abruptly as a light footstep rung along the uncarpeted corridor. A low, mellow whistle.

"That's my bird!" the gambler whispered, his lips almost touching the bent ear of Garl Megilp. "Listen—"

He uttered a few hasty sentences, then rose from the bed.

"Follow me down stairs, but pass out at the side door. I don't want to see you too soon, with that fellow in my company. You sabe?"

"I'll do my part, never you worry, boss."

Steel-face left the light burning when he left the room, descending the stairs and pausing long enough to catch the coming steps of Garl Megilp. A vicious smile flitted across his white face as he turned away and entered the office and bar-room combined.

Almost the first figure that caught his gaze was that of Howard Carter, leaning gracefully against one end of the bar, a self-rolled cigarette daintily held between his pink fingers, his great blue eyes languidly piercing the thin smoke-wreaths.

Opposite, with a clear space between them and this "curled darling," stood half a score rough-clad fellows, their faces wearing anything but smiles at being thus lazily stared at by a creature whom any one of their number could have taken across his knee and broken in two.

The dude turned at the step of the gambler, a faint smile lighting up his face as he nodded a greeting with the painfully distinct words:

"They are human—actually belong to the same race as you and I, dear fellow! Actually, you know! I've been examining them."

One of the men started forward, with hotly flushed face and hard, vicious tones:

"Ef I thought I belonged to the same fambly as you, I'd blow my brains out with a bullet o' hot mush! You back him up, Lee Facer?"

A low, hard laugh came from the lips of the gambler as he raised one hand deprecatingly.

"Tit for tat, pardner! You fellows pitched onto this gent, back in the grub depot, and had your fun at his expense, just because he chooses to rig out a little different from your style. He is no fool, and took the first chance to hit back, straight from the shoulder. You shouldn't be the first one to squeal."

"Sech frills ain't in season out hyar, no-how!"

"Your style is just as strange to this gentleman, and would cause fully as much comment back where he came from. Come—don't kick up a row over nothing. You've each had your fling. You're each too good fellows to cut throats over such a trifle. You are both my friends; but I stand by the one who was first affronted. And you know what that means, coming from my lips."

Howard Carter stepped forward, his voice clear and unaffected, his manner frank and manly.

"Two wrongs don't make one right, gentleman. I ask pardon for my insolent words. I'm little, but I've got a heart as big as the best man among you all. Shall we drop the vail? And drink to our better acquaintance all 'round?"

Without waiting for a response, the dude turned to the bar, bidding Bald Ebenezer set out the best the house afforded. And over their glasses the party drowned all hard feelings. After all, there were far worse fellows in this world than the little dude!

Steel-face drank with the rest, but made a wry face afterward, which Howard Carter was only too ready to interpret correctly. Poor judge of liquor though he was, he knew enough to realize the vast difference between this fiery stuff and the contents of that wicker flask.

A few minutes later the twain were outside the hotel, strolling arm-in-arm through the little mining-town, every second building seeming to be a saloon, and all of them fairly well patronized.

"Old Ebenezer can keep a hotel, after a fashion, but he can't keep first-class poison," lightly laughed Steel-face, as he led his companion into a narrow side street or alley, shaking the flask which he drew from his bosom. "I've got to kill the taste of that rot-gut, or I'll be on the sick-list in the morning!"

Howard Carter needed no persuasion to follow suit, and he took a little more of the oily poison than he intended. Still, he was beginning to like it, and made little moan over his mistake.

"You did yourself proud, back there, do you know?" laughed Steel-face as they resumed their stroll. "My heart was clear up in my throat when you uttered those words, for I looked for nothing less than a general broadside from those lambs!"

"I'm little, but I don't like to be run over rough shod. I expected something of the sort myself, but when I decided to come West, I made up my mind to give as good as I got, if it took the hair off!"

"And that reminds me," suddenly exclaimed Steel-face. "You asked me if I had ever heard of one Anson Carter?"

"And you said you had not," with a change of air which the keen-sensed sport readily interpreted aright.

"That was in the coach; now I can answer differently. Just after you left the dining-room, I caught that name spoken at the further end of the table, by a rough, knock-about fellow whom his mates called Garl, or some such heathenish title. Thinking of you, I listened, but only caught a few words more; barely enough to let me know that this Garl claimed Anson Carter as an old-time pard of his."

"You would know the man again?" slowly asked Howard.

"I never forget a face or a voice," with a light laugh. "Doubtless we might run across the fellow by taking the rounds of the rum-holes; his face was that of a hard drinker from 'way back! Or—we may find him at table in the morning."

"I would rather meet him this evening. We leave for Top Notch on the morning stage, you know. If it wouldn't be too much trouble—"

"Never mention it, dear fellow," cordially interposed Steel-face, laughing softly as he felt the game going all his own way. "I'm not much of a night-bird, myself, but Gold Hills is not so large that a man can't rake it over in an hour or two. Shall we hunt up this Garl?"

"By all means!" was the response, given with an eagerness that showed itself, despite the effort at restraint which the young man put upon his emotions. "If he can tell me aught about Anson Carter, I want to see him. If he can give me the information I need, it will be money in his pocket!"

"Don't offer it too suddenly," warned the gambler. "He looked a tough case, but clothes

don't make the man out here, and you might be offering an insult instead of a favor."

Steel-face led the way into the nearest saloon, where he called for the drinks as a convenient cover to his pretended search for the man they were seeking. Howard drank with the rest, an anxious light in his blue eyes as he watched the slow, scrutinizing gaze which Lee Facer cast about the room.

Time and again Steel-face repeated this maneuver, dallying with his intended victim until he saw that the young man barely touched his lips to the vile liquor, instead of drinking freely. Then he led the way into the saloon kept by Dimple Dick, where he had ordered Garl Megilp to await their coming.

And ten minutes later Howard Carter was seated opposite the grim desperado, eagerly listening to him talk of his old pard, Anson Carter!

Steel-face formed one of the company, liberally supplied the little table with drinks, his evil eyes glowing viciously as he saw how often the young man emptied his glass while listening and questioning.

Garl Megilp played his part to perfection, considering the brief time he had for rehearsal, and whenever he seemed at a loss, which was seldom, Steel-face would supply the missing cue.

Then, when satisfied that his victim was fairly within the toils, the gambler sprung to his feet, with a hasty look at his watch.

"So late? Will you excuse me for a few moments, dear fellow? I have an appointment which I must positively fill, and the time has already passed! Will you wait here, or can you find your way back to the hotel without a guide?"

"If not, I can inquire the way. You were saying?"

Steel-face smothered a smile of savage joy as he saw how wholly his victim was under the spell, and without more words he turned away, settling his score at the bar, again drawing forth his watch and mentioning the time in tones which the barkeeper could not fail to note. Then, satisfied with his work thus far, he left the saloon.

He hastened back to the hotel, perfecting an alibi by asking Ebenezer Flick if an appointment had been kept, giving a name, showing grim disappointment as he exhibited his watch as proof that the hour had already passed.

Back in the den presided over by Dimple Dick, Howard Carter was still seated at the little table with Garl Megilp for his sole companion, for the two dark-browed fellows who had been with Megilp at first, had not tarried long after the departure of Steel-face.

Repeated potations apparently affected Garl Megilp much more than his companion. His voice grew thick and husky, his manner harsher and less agreeable. The eager questions with which the little dude plied him seemed to grow irritating, and he growled out huskily:

"What I don't know I can't tell, kin I? This Last Hope ain't none o' my ole pard's namin'. I didn't find Anson Carter, an' they couldn't shove off no old Jones onto me—I didn't want none o' him in mine!"

"Jones? Not Thompson Jones?" suddenly demanded Carter, his eyes filling with a sudden light, his flushed face turning white.

"Who's Jones?" hiccupped Garl, with a stare that would have been ferocious if it hadn't been so sleepy. "Who's Thompson? Durn Jones Thompson! Augh! go shake 'self! When I say—sleep, I—mean—"

With a heavy grunt his head drooped to the table, and Garl Megilp gave no answer to the repeated shakings which were given him by the now greatly excited dude. That name—the name of Thompson Jones—seemed to afford him a clew until then lost or overlooked; but he could gain no further information from this drunken brute.

When satisfied of this, he rose to his feet, steadying himself for a brief space by the table, until his brain grew a little more steady. For the first time in his life Howard Carter knew what it meant to be drunk!

Struggling desperately to steady himself, he reached the bar and spread a handful of gold on the counter, turning away without a thought of taking change, his brain filled with one idea; how to regain the hotel and question his new friend about this Thompson Jones.

The fresh air outside only increased his drunkenness, and it was an already helpless victim on which two stout ruffians pounced, flinging a heavy blanket over his head and dragging him into the shadows.

The trap so cunningly baited had caught its destined victim!

CHAPTER V.

"WHO STRUCK BILLY PATTERSON?"

"A JOKE's a joke, but when it comes to hiring a man to laugh for you—how could you do it, pardner?"

There was an almost plaintive reproach in the voice of Timber Doodle as he turned from the door of the Lone Cabin to gaze sadly into the ghastly white face of Jay Dillon.

One glance the gambler had given the interior,

only to stagger back with a gasping, choking cry of mingled rage and wonder, not entirely free from fear.

What did it mean? What unexpected turn had this strange drama taken? What was there in the suicide's home to blanch the cheeks of Jay Dillon, and send him staggering back like a helpless child?

Eagerly, almost breathlessly, the citizens of Top Notch had watched the movements of the two men brought forward so prominently, for the moment almost forgetting that there was in their midst a man charged with murder most foul. To them, this was a drama more thrilling by far than any they had ever witnessed on the mimic stage.

Hardly a man among them but held his breath as Timber Doodle flung open the slab door, and every eye was strained to catch a glimpse of the horrors thus to be unveiled.

Over every frame a cold chill ran thrillingly as the cool little sport turned with that half-disgusted query. And as Jay Dillon reeled dizzily back, the picture of savage doubt and dismay, the pent-up breath which escaped the crowd sounded almost like a groan.

"I'm a two-story swine when it comes to fun, pardner, and I can do double share of making believe when a joke needs nourishing a little, but this attempt is *too* unhealthy—too far gone for anything but the undertaker; and he wants to borrow a scent-proof nose! Didn't think it of ye, pardner—no I didn't, now!"

With a reproachful gaze and melancholy shake of the head, Timber Doodle stepped back, mournful in face as one who has lost his last earthly friend.

The words, or that movement, seemed to break the spell which had fallen upon the tall gambler, and with a vicious oath he grated:

"Your work, you mocking devil! What have you done with him? How have you—I'll tear the truth from your throat!"

Panther-like the gambler leaped forward, his usually handsome face that of a crazed demon, his teeth clicking, his lips tinged with the froth of madness, his quivering fingers curved as though already closing about the windpipe of the cool sport.

It was the act of a madman in more senses than one, for one who could talk and act as this stranger had, that day, was not a man to be caught and strangled off-hand. An involuntary cry of warning broke from some of the crowd, but it was not needed.

With a light, careless laugh, Timber Doodle met that frenzied attack without the faintest show of flinching. His little hands shot out and brushed those quivering claws aside. Then—Jay Dillon went staggering back, to come in sharp contact with the form of Tracy Unwin, who was springing toward the open door of the hut, eager to solve the black mystery which had threatened his neck with a rope.

"Out of my path, you lying cur!" grated the young foreman of the Last Hope, with a blow that was too hasty to have much effect, even if his arm had not been caught by the quick hand of George Hampton, whose cold, stern voice rung out distinctly:

"Simmer down, both of you, or by the Lord of Hosts! I'll call for buck-and-gag until we can get at the bottom facts in this case! Gentlemen, I call on you to aid me in this!"

"One of whom I am which—and entirely at your service, dear fellow!" promptly cried Timber Doodle, gaining the side of the speaker, and at the same time deftly freeing Tracy Unwin from that sturdy grip. "A dozen of you hold that cyclone down; I can manage this one!"

"And I'll keep an eye on you both," grimly uttered Hampton, with a dangerous glow in his honest eyes. "You run a mighty limber tongue—"

"It was born that way, pardner," laughed Timber Doodle.

"Who the devil are you, anyway?"

"That's as good a title as any, so let it go at that," with a mocking bow. "If not the Old Boy in person, I'm a devil of a fellow, take me by and large; and—Hello, pardner!"

Jay Dillon had recovered his senses in a partial degree, forcing his tones to steadiness as he stepped before the cool little sport.

"You are at the bottom of all this, you grinning demon! You stole away the proof that would fit a noose about the neck of your fellow ruffian—that *will* fit it there, despite you all!"

"You've got 'em—got 'em mighty bad, too!" with a pitying shake of the head. "Fight ag'inst it, pard. Bite tha'r heads off as often as they run up in your throat, an' never look down at your boots. It'd be a monstrous pity to shave that noble nut of yours, but—Eh?"

George Hampton was tapping the speaker on one shoulder.

"Don't you talk too much, stranger. You can't pick up a row here until after this affair is fairly straightened out. Will you hold your hush a bit, or shall we compel you?"

"Clam. Buttoned up. Lights out. In bed and snoring!"

Timber Doodle stood meekly with fingers locked before him, his eyes half-closed, his face filled with submission. But Jay Dillon, iron-nerved though people thought him, gave a little

shiver as he felt that those veiled orbs were noting his every motion.

Who and what was this enigma? This pigmy with the strength of a giant? From whence did he come, and for what purpose? How much—

He started as he felt the hand of George Hampton touch his arm.

"Come with me, Jay. And you, Unwin. With your permission, friends," casting a glance over his shoulder toward the citizens, who were beginning to stir and bustle as though that peculiar spell was wearing off. "You shall all see what there is to be seen, but I beg of you to hold back until a fair examination is made. These two men have swapped dark charges, and I want them to see what lies in yonder before a rush mixes things up. That's no more than white, is it?"

"Go, ahead, boss, we can trust you! All we ask is a fair shake all 'round the board!" cried one of the citizens.

"Go in alone, Hampton," amended Timber Doodle, with sudden gravity. "You seem to be cock of the walk just now, and I'm not crowing in opposition, just to be contrary, but if there is anything more than a clumsy jest in this affair, you don't want too many hot-heads at your elbow in such close quarters."

Hampton frowned a little at the first words, but his honest face cleared up as he recognized the good sense of the stranger.

"Perhaps that will be best. Wait here, gentlemen. And keep your fingers from each other's throats, please!"

With a quick step he strode to the door and entered the Lone Hut.

There was only the one room, small and gloomy, for the only light came through the open door.

A frown darkened his face, for a single glance showed him the absence of the corpse he had been led to expect. For an instant he felt like cursing the author of such a clumsy joke; but then a low ejaculation parted his paling lips, and he sprung aside, permitting the sunlight to fall upon the floor, unobscured by his shadow.

There were rude, spidery marks on the dirty puncheons forming the floor, and now he could see that they were traced in red—in what might easily be blood!

Thus far the words of Jay Dillon were substantiated; but instead of the terrible charge which he had sworn they would find, George Hampton read that ancient conundrum:

"Who struck Billy Patterson?"

Only those words. Traced as it might be with a trembling, uncertain hand—with a finger-tip dipped in fresh blood, so far as appearance went. Above them, as Hampton now stood, was a dull red stain, now dried or evaporated save what portion had sunk into the course-grained wood. This might have come from human veins. It might have been shed only hours ago, but might have been days or weeks in age, for aught the puzzled man could say, just then.

A dark frown wrinkled his brow as he turned to the threshold, one hand beckoning as he called aloud:

"You two gentlemen come here. I'll get at the bottom of this, if I have to put the screws on you both my own self!"

Tracy Unwin sprang forward, white-faced and lurid-eyed. Dillon followed close at his heels. Almost even with him glided Timber Doodle with still sleepy eyes, while behind flocked the eager citizens.

Tracy Unwin drew a long breath of intense relief as his dark eyes read the spidery words on the floor, but Jay Dillon groaned a vicious oath between his teeth as he cried hoarsely:

"The words are changed! And by the same hand that carried off the corpse of Thompson Jones! *Your* hand, you demon!" wheeling and shaking a clinched fist full in the face of Timber Doodle.

"Then that lets my pardner out, don't it?" drawled the Cool Hand, a smile on his face, a laughing devil in his gray eyes. "I'm the scapegoat now, it seems? No doubt your turn will come next, stranger!" with a nod toward George Hampton.

With a desperate effort Dillon choked down the mad rage that bade fair to suffocate him. This cool, contemptuous speech showed him how seriously he was damaging his own cause. It was hard, but he proved equal to the task. Once more he was the cool, dangerous gamester.

"Gentlemen—friends!" he cried, as he sprung to the door, passing the threshold only to turn and face the open door through which the white face of the man he accused was plainly visible, "you know me. You know whether my word is to be depended upon or not. You know whether I can be believed on oath."

"With or without the oath!" promptly cried a strong voice.

"On my sacred oath I swear to you that I found the bloody corpse of Thompson Jones lying on yonder floor! I swear to you that under his lifeless hand I read the words '*Murdered—by Tracy Unwin!*'"

"String him up!"

"Rope the dirty whelp!"

Pitt Bynight was the first speaker; Hod Geary the second.

But they did not lack seconds, and that horrible, chilling sound grew louder and fiercer—the cry for human blood!

White as a ghost, Tracy Unwin slipped from the restraining grasp of Timber Doodle, leaping through the open door and boldly facing the men who were rapidly being changed into ravening wild beasts.

"He swears to a lie, men of Top Notch, when he dares to say I killed Thompson Jones! If a murder has been done—if such words were traced in human blood on yonder floor, his finger shaped the one, and his stained hands committed the other!"

Dillon crouched, quivering in every muscle, about to leap at the throat from whence came those burning words; but in that instant a slender form shot in between the two white-faced men, cool and smiling.

"I don't reckon I would, ef I was you, pardner," came softly from those lips, in strong contrast to the deadly fire that filled those gray eyes. "I reckon I'd wait until my brain grew a little cooler an' they was a little less red in the two eyes o' me."

"Down him, too!" growled Pitt Bynight, starting forward, only to shrink back again as he stared into a grim bore over which Timber Doodle was gazing at him.

"Swallow your tongue, bully, and let your betters speak!"

George Hampton, flushed and hot, strode through the doorway and gained the side of the little stranger. Honest as day, wanting nothing but what was right and just, fearless in the discharge of what he believed a duty, these sudden changes were taking him by surprise. His brain was a trifle slow to act, and those hot heads were shifting the scenes too rapidly for him to keep pace or to hold them in complete check.

His strong hand closed like a vise on the arm of Timber Doodle, and there was danger in both face and voice as the little sport faced about.

"Who are you, anyway?" sternly demanded Hampton, tightening his grip as though anticipating resistance. "Who set you up as judge and jury in this case? What is your interest in the matter?"

"The same as yours, sir," was the swift response, cool and grave, the gray eyes squarely encountering those stern brown orbs. "I want to see a square deal all 'round the board. I want to see the innocent saved and the guilty convicted—even if of nothing more serious than a clumsy joke on Sunday!"

"You think it is no worse than a joke?" hesitated Hampton.

Timber Doodle shrugged his shoulders. "Don't it look like it? Don't you smell something most awfully ancient and fish-like? Faugh!" with intense disgust written on his speaking features as he averted his nose.

"It is a jest that has caused the death of one good and true man, then!" sharply interposed Dillon.

"I don't wonder at that, even in this day of chestnuts!"

"And yonder stands the foul assassin!" with a quivering finger pointing at the erect figure of Tracy Unwin as his flaming gaze turned upon the excited but perplexed citizens. "Men, will you stand idly by and let the death of your fellow-citizen go unavenged? Will you permit this foul assassin to escape without even a trial?"

"Stick a pin right thar, critter!" sharply ejaculated Timber Doodle, slipping out of the grasp of George Hampton as though he possessed all the qualities of an eel. "A trial is good enough, but that don't suit your book. You want a hangin' fu'st, then a 'vestigation, I reckon!"

"Send him up to keep balance, and you'll not be far out of the way, I'm thinking," showing his white teeth as he flashed a vicious glance toward the little stranger. "Who is he? Why does he so stubbornly defend the red-handed? Why—if not a partner in guilt?"

The crowd swayed uneasily, with a sullen muttering sound that was almost ready to burst out into that frightful yell for human life. Eyes began to turn red. Hands to clutch weapons. Forms to crouch and muscles to tighten preparatory to crushing all opposition.

George Hampton saw all this, and knew from past experience just what it portended. He wanted justice done, but not after this fashion.

"Hold hard, friends!" he cried, his own hands arming, his face growing white and stern as he strode in front of Tracy Unwin. "We want to get at the bottom facts before we begin to fit a noose. You don't want to turn assassin, nor do I. Then, I beg of you, keep cool until we can fairly investigate this affair!"

Not another man in all the company could have succeeded in calming that dangerous crowd so suddenly, so completely. Every man in it knew the speaker—knew him to be honest as day—knew him to be fearless in discharging what he felt to be his duty—knew that if crowded now he had fairly taken a stand, he would die in his tracks without budging. And they knew, too, that he would not die alone—that he could and would use those weapons with deadly effect.

Timber Doodle laughed softly as his keen eyes noted the savage rage that for a single instant flashed forth from the jetty orbs of the tall gambler who seemed so eager to avenge the murder of Thompson Jones—laughed as he saw how completely Dillon felt himself defeated, just when he counted victory the most sure.

George Hampton caught that laugh, and turned frowningly upon him.

"Once more, sir, I ask who and what you are?"

"I'm Blackstone Coke, Esquire," with a low bow, one hand gracefully pressed above his heart. "I'm a peregrinating lawyer, searching the wilderness for unfortunate victims to injustice and calumny. I am a professional champion of innocence—and, right here I expect to get in some of the neatest work you ever witnessed!"

As he uttered the last words, Timber Doodle dropped one hand on the arm of Tracy Unwin, who flashed him one grateful glance; then resumed his steady look at Dillon.

"You think he is innocent, then?" hesitated Hampton.

"Innocent—of what?" flashed Timber Doodle, smiling derisively. "Of playing such a horrible jest? Of— Look at him, gentlemen of the jury! Look at the face of my noble client, and state, on your oaths, does he look like an idiot? Then he is innocent, and may you sleep the sleep this night of good and true men who feel that they have done themselves proud by— Eh?" with an astonished stare at Hampton, whose strong grip had cut him short.

"Innocent of killing Thompson Jones, I meant," frowning.

"Who says Thompson Jones is dead?"

"I do!" grated Dillon, chafing against this loss of precious time. "I saw him in yonder with a cleft breast and a bullet-pierced back! I say he is dead—murdered—and by Tracy Unwin!"

Timber Doodle laughed derisively.

"And the proof is—what? Who struck Billy Patterson? Tracy Unwin, of course. No matter if he wasn't born at the time. In yonder stands the blood-red record! No matter if there is no *corpus delicti*. No matter if there is no murdered man. Jay Dillon swears to it all—and Jay Dillon is truth and honor and veracity itself!"

George Hampton shifted uneasily, muttering: "Come! idle chaff is no argument. A serious charge has been made against Mr. Unwin. He must meet and disprove it, or suffer the consequence due such a foul crime!"

Timber Doodle stared at the speaker, his eyes widely opened, his face full of surprise, his voice ringing with amazement as he cried:

"What? Surely, you are not taking this nonsense seriously? Why, man alive! there isn't the ghost of truth or reason in the whole affair!"

"I kin give that the lie!" cried Hod Geary, pushing into the front rank of the puzzled citizens.

"Take just three steps more, pritty, and I can finish painting those elegant eyes of yours," blandly smiled the cool sport.

Hod Geary showed his bulldog teeth in a vicious snarl, but stood his ground without flinching, like one who feels he has right and justice at his back.

"I'll try to even-up with you fer that, when this job is over with," he said, with a surly nod, adding: "I know that Tracy Unwin had a row with old Jones, fer I see'd an' hearn it pritty nigh all!"

"That's truth itself!" chimed in Pitt Bynight from the rear. "I was with Hod, an' see jest what he says. An' more—I'm open to take my solemn 'davy that the young feller swore he'd git even with old man Jones fer kickin' him out o' his sit!"

"Any other county to hear from?" coolly demanded Timber Doodle, a mocking, sneering smile upon his lips, but with a growing gleam in his keen eyes that betrayed his mental uneasiness.

Dillon saw this, and it helped to cool his brain and steady his nerves. If a cool hand like this could grow uneasy, surely the cause he championed must be growing desperate!

With arms folded over his swelling bosom, he spoke out coldly:

"As to the quarrel, I can say nothing; but this much I do know: No later ago than last evening, Thompson Jones told me he had discharged his foreman, for insolence and insubordination."

"You lie in your throat, Jay Dillon!" flashed the accused, twin spots of red springing into his pale cheeks. "I never had a word of dispute or quarrel with Thompson Jones. I never threatened him, as these hired tools of yours are ready to take oath—to perjure themselves for your gold—the dirty vermin!"

"Cool and easy, pard!" warningly muttered Timber Doodle, his free hand grasping the quivering arm of his client. "Try to keep a still tongue betwixt your teeth, and let me do the talking. I'll—"

"Men of Top Notch!" cried Dillon, his voice ringing out like a death-knell, his eyes ablaze but his face as cold as ice to the eye. "Are you willing to stand idle while your friend is un-

avenged? Are you willing to stand by and listen—"

"Bite it off short, sport!" sharply interjected Timber Doodle, one step in advance as his revolver came to a level with the blazing eyes of the gambler. "Button up your lip, or I'll sink a shaft right through your brain-pain! And that at the first hand that raises against either my client or myself! Take notice, everybody!"

There was nothing like mockery in either face or voice just now. If ever mortal man meant what he said, that man now held Jay Dillon at his mercy. There was death in those keen gray eyes. And none realized this more completely than did the threatened man himself.

Dillon was no coward, physically speaking. Give him even the ghost of a chance for life, and he would face the heaviest odds without "turning a hair." But this was different. A touch of that steady finger would send a bullet crashing through his brain, and he not have time to utter a cry or strike a blow in return.

Desperately bold though he had so often proven himself, the gambler was cowed just now. He visibly flinched, a hunted terror in his black eyes. And steady as fate that grim muzzle kept pace with his shinking, while Timber Doodle clearly pronounced:

"I could force the truth from your vile lips, Jay Dillon, right now and here! But your friends would swallow it with a taste of lie. They would think you spoke only to save your worthless life. They would be even more sure to believe your retraction, when I once loosed my grip."

"Then let up on him!" harshly uttered George Hampton.

"On one condition, I'll do it," was the prompt retort.

CHAPTER VI.

CHARGES AND COUNTER-CHARGES.

WAS this cool-hand Argus-eyed?

It surely seemed so, just then, for his left hand shot across his leveled right arm, gripping a revolver whose silver drop bore full upon the knuckle marked face of Hod Geary.

"Chip, and I call you, Squatty!" Timber Doodle called out in business-like tones. "Put up that barker, or we'll have rusty bacon for supper!"

The stunted Hercules fancied the longed-for chance was his when this stranger covered Jay Dillon—fancied that he could secure full revenge for that stunning blow between the eyes, and at the same time turn the tables in favor of his patron by dropping his enemy with a snap-shot. He had a partial cover for his movements in several of the excited citizens who had forged a little in front. The stranger had eyes only for the tall gambler. Himself a fair shot, he could not miss at that scant distance, and—

The stunted Hercules was too greatly startled to risk the snap-shot. If Timber Doodle had challenged him after any ordinary fashion; if he had wheeled about in his tracks, or even had he cast a glance in that direction; the vicious desperado would surely have risked a shot for his double stake. But this savored of magic, and with a superstitious chill creeping over him, Hod Geary cowered before that weapon.

"I'm playing a lone hand just now, gentlemen," added the little sport, his tones clear and even, yet with a thinly veiled fierceness underlying the words, "but I'm a man who makes every card count. Keep the curs from snapping at my heels, or I'll face a red flush all over this hill-side—and you'll top the pile Jay Dillon!"

"And you'll pull hemp if you dare burn a grain of powder!" sharply interjected George Hampton.

Timber Doodle never turned his eyes from the white face of the gambler who still cowered before his weapon. Colder, clearer came his tones in reply.

"Take care you don't jar the hammer down by breathing too loud, pardner! I'm mighty nervous. A grip on my shoulder or a hand at my throat just now would spoil the looks of that sweet mug, forever! If you love Jay-bird Dillon, snap up my provisional offer."

"What is it you ask?" almost sullenly growled the citizen, madly chafing at the ugly dilemma into which this audacious stranger had cast him so unexpectedly.

"A fair shake all 'round," was the instant response. "Nothing more than your guarantee of a fair and square trial, with a decision for or against my client, in strict accordance with the evidence. Give me your word to that effect, and I let up on Jay-bird. With you as my backer, I'm ready to risk the honor of Top Notch."

George Hampton gave a long breath of relief that was audible to every man there. He had expected much harder terms than these, from the audacious stranger, and his reply, was swift.

"I give my word that Tracy Unwin shall have fair-play, and unless his guilt is fairly proven, I'll defend his life with my own!"

"That's enough, and Jay-bird can flop his wings without staring through the gateway of sure destruction," laughed Timber Doodle, stepping back a pace, lowering his tools, but still holding them with hammers lifted and finger on

trigger as his gray eyes roved keenly over the crowd.

Better than most men he knew that the moment of victory was the very one when danger was greatest. Better than most he knew how powerful the temptation foiled men have to struggle against; how easy it seems to regain all by yielding to sudden impulse; and he held himself ready to frustrate any such attempt.

Hod Geary was still cowering behind his living shield. Pitt Bynight was scowling defiantly, but careful to keep his hands away from the heavy weapons he bore at his waist. Like the stunted Hercules, the swarthy giant began to regard this pigmy with a superstitious eye.

Cold and stern, George Hampton stepped to the side of the man who seemed to think it only sport to face down a crowd.

With uplifted hand he stilled the low, ugly, murmuring sound that came from the citizens.

"My good friends, you heard the promise I made this—this gentleman," stumbling slightly over the title, but honestly forcing it through his teeth. "I acted for what I thought the best. I knew that refusal would surely cause death to more than one of us, and though the end could only come one way, why should the innocent suffer with the guilty?"

"Amen!" ejaculated Timber Doodle, his voice grave and earnest.

"One of our citizens declares that a foul murder has been committed, and charges another with the awful crime. He denies the charge. There is an ugly lie out somewhere, and what we want first is to get at the simple truth."

"Which is precisely what I'm holding out for," bowed Timber Doodle. "Jay Dillon brings the charge against my client. I claim that he lies in his throat, and call on him to bring forward his proofs. Legal evidence, mind you, gentlemen: not the noose of lynch-law!"

"And I have passed my word to that effect, as you heard, friends," gravely added George Hampton. "If Tracy Unwin is found guilty, without reasonable doubt, I'll be among the first to stretch his neck. But until he is found guilty, I'll defend his life and liberty with my own."

"Fairer than that no man can say or ask," heartily cried Timber Doodle, freeing one hand to cordially grasp that of the sturdy if somewhat sluggish citizen. "And as a sample, I beg your pardon for chaffing you a little when I knew you less perfectly. Shake, and forget?"

But George Hampton was no weathercock. He frowned coldly as he shook his head, both hands going behind his back.

"I cross no man's palm who fears or is ashamed to give his own name. I have yielded more than one point in your favor, but that was to spare the shedding of blood. Don't try to crowd me clear over the line, or you may still come out second-best!"

The crowd shifted with a buzz of approval, and one man cried:

"Good on your head, Georgy! Make the critter show his hand!"

A vicious glitter shot into the dark eyes of the gambler as he saw events once more seeming to favor his cause. He felt that silence could best serve him just then, but he could not resist the temptation of sneering:

"Don't make the poor devil criminate himself, Hampton. If necessary, we can find out by searching the rogues' gallery!"

Timber Doodle bowed with a bland smile.

"I don't know a person better qualified to speak with certainty of that collection than you, my dear fellow! But I'll spare you the trouble of searching the Directory. I called myself Timber Doodle, and if any of you gentlemen have hunted the gallant long-bill, you can readily guess why I chose that title when I tell you my lawful name is John Woodcock, from—"

"Pistol Johnny! I knowed it from the fu'st jump-off!" cried one of the crowd, in excited tones. "I knowed I'd seen him afore, but jest when an' whar I couldn't figger out! Pistol Johnny—the dandy sport as run King Philip an' his gang into camp up Tight Squeeze way!"

Silence followed this hasty outburst, and every eye was turned upon the smiling face of the cool hand, who bowed slightly as a silent laugh filled his keen eyes.

"I have been called by that title, I confess, gentlemen, and though it was none of my selection, I've tried never to disgrace it. But let that pass. Just now I'm heap more interested in this Thompson Jones mystery. I want to see even the ghost of a stain wiped off the honor of this man—a stranger to me until this very day."

He turned and frankly grasped the hand of Tracy Unwin, adding:

"Awful cheeky of me, wasn't it, pardner? Chipping in without asking your leave! But I couldn't help it when I saw two roughs bouncing you from cover. That's my weakness; but when I do chip, I'm in the game to stay while I've a stake left."

The foreman of the Last Hope gripped his hand tightly, and there was something like a tremor in his voice as he muttered:

"I thank you. Only for you, I'd be a corpse now—lynched for a crime I never dreamed of committing!"

"Don't I know that?" with a low, mellow laugh, seemingly forgetting all else for the moment. "Would I have risked my little reputation by trying to shield a criminal of that color? Not a bit of it, pardner! If Thompson Jones is dead—"

"And there stands his assassin!" viciously cried Dillon, a passion-quivering finger indicating the young foreman. "Tracy Unwin murdered Jones, and I call for justice on the red-handed criminal!"

"If justice was done, you'd have to speak through a silver tube, my gentle knave of diamonds," laughed Pistol Johnny, wheeling sharply upon the gambler. "The noose would shut off your melodious song, else!"

George Hampton again interfered to restore order.

"This is worse than folly, gentlemen!" he cried, frowningly. "Bandyng epithets and making wild insinuations will never get us out of this miserable tangle—will never avenge the murder of our respected fellow-citizen!"

"If he is murdered," amended Pistol Johnny, with a low laugh.

Poor George Hampton stared at the speaker with perplexity written on every feature. He was growing bewildered by these rapid changes, and found it more and more difficult to keep pace with them.

"But Jay Dillon said—"

"More than he can prove, or I'm widely off my base," coolly interposed Woodcock. "Still, we're magnanimous. We're willing to give him a chance for lying himself out of the snarl his evil passions have led him into. Oh, there's nothing small about us—but our transgressions!"

White-faced, vicious-eyed, Jay Dillon forced his hot rage down. He saw that no ordinary champion had risen up to defend the man whom he had sworn should that day dangle at the end of a rope. He knew that he must play his cards carefully, deliberately, if he hoped to win, after what had so unexpectedly occurred.

"It is easy to sneer and insinuate. It is safe for an armed man to threaten or insult a gentleman who has given up his tools so that there may be no excuse for dodging an issue. Safe—but is it honest or manly? I leave it to you, fellow-citizens!"

"It is the truth that cuts," swiftly exclaimed Pistol Johnny, without giving time for any other answer to this specious appeal. "But if that chokes you, Jay Dillon, we'll see how glibly you can spit out perjury by the peck."

He turned to George Hampton and added gravely:

"We are in your hands, Mr. Hampton, and ready to stand trial whenever you see fit. Though you are more of a friend to that viper than to our side, we are quite ready to accept you as judge or umpire, whichever title best fits the emergency. All we ask is a fair shake—and that I know my client will receive at your hands."

"Just so surely as that I'll sentence him to the rope if he is proven guilty of murdering Thompson Jones!" sternly uttered the other, his brown eyes glowing resolutely.

Jay Dillon bit his lips until the red blood tinged his white teeth, but he dared not demur in the face of the pleased murmur which ran through the crowd. Great as his influence undoubtedly was among the more reckless classes, he knew it would not bear him out in a fight against a square deal as proposed by the other side.

"If I fail to make my charge good, I'm willing to take the place Tracy Unwin should be this moment filling!" he cried with stern emphasis. "I accept George Hampton as judge. I am ready to give in my evidence as soon as called upon."

"And I'm just itching all over for a fair chance to ask you a few questions, my dear fellow," smiled Pistol Johnny, showing his teeth.

Jay Dillon flushed hotly, then turned whiter than ever. But his voice was clear and even as he added:

"In the interests of common justice, I object to that fellow taking any such part in this affair. For all we know, he may have had a hand in this foul crime—he may have helped Tracy Unwin assassinate Thompson Jones!"

Pistol Johnny laughed softly, amused contempt in every feature.

"Do I look like a fellow who needed to call in help to kill just one man? And he old enough to be a grandfather? How could you say it, Jay-bird? And you howling about loose insults, too!"

George Hampton turned from one to the other, his perplexity almost laughable. In vain did he try to grasp and hold fast to the right end of this strange snarl. No sooner did he begin untangling it than the end was jerked out of his hand, and he left groping for it.

Tracy Unwin saw this, and with a generosity that did his heart more credit than his brain, he stepped forward and spoke to him:

"I am willing to leave it all to you, sir. The only words I ever had with Thompson Jones, were—"

"You denied having any words with him at all but a bit ago," exultantly interrupted Jay Dillon, his jetty eyes turning almost red.

"For words, read quarrel," promptly interpreted Pistol Johnny, ever on the alert. "Just what those words were we'll show when you have put your charges in regular form. Until then we are silent."

His fingers closed on the arm of the young foreman, and he led him aside a few feet, whispering earnestly in his ear. He kept one eye on the movements of their chief enemy all the time, and frowned a trifle as he saw him while mingling with the buzzing crowd, seemingly speak to both Hod Geary and Pitt Bynight.

"The fellow means to make you pull hemp if he can bring it about without sticking his own neck through the same noose," he muttered, with a frown. "You don't want to be too reckless in your talk, my dear fellow. Remember we are the accused party, and so on guard. Let those rascals do all the leading, will you?"

"I'll tell all I know," was the quiet response. "If harm has come to Thompson Jones, my first object is to fetch out all the facts, that the criminal may be punished as he deserves."

"But you didn't have any quarrel with the old gent?" anxiously persisted Pistol Johnny.

"Not a quarrel," was the slow response. "He discharged me, and—"

Tracy broke off abruptly as he saw George Hampton approaching.

There was a frown on the honest face of the man, and something like uneasiness in his voice as he hurriedly uttered:

"The crowd insists on my running the affair after my own fashion: on playing judge and jury both. I'd rather not, if I can get out of it, and if you object, I'll do the best I know how to change their mind," nervously wiping his damp brow.

"And if we beg of you to serve?" smiled Pistol Johnny.

"That would make it some easier, anyhow," with a breath of relief.

"And insure us an honest decision, which is precisely what we want most. We are innocent, and will prove as much to your satisfaction, or I'm terribly far from home," laughed the Cool Hand.

Where all the parties are of one mind, preliminaries are quickly adjusted, and ten minutes later, George Hampton, bareheaded, with a brace of cocked revolvers resting across his knees, was seated in the door of the Lone Cabin, ready to hear the evidence.

A little to one side, and before him, Tracy Unwin stood, with arms folded across his breast. At his side was Pistol Johnny, bland and smiling outwardly, but what a warning gleam in his keen gray eyes.

Directly opposite stood Jay Dillon, cold and composed, yet looking like a man who had cast his all on this one play. Beyond him, a pace in front of the closely drawn ring of eager spectators, stood Hod Geary and Pitt Bynight, sullen of face, vengeful of eye.

George Hampton looked inquiringly toward Jay Dillon, who promptly responded by baring his head, speaking coldly, clearly:

"I saw Thompson Jones for the last time in life, late yesterday afternoon, at his claim, the Last Hope. Business called me there; business which I am ready to explain when the proper time comes. I found the old gentleman somewhat out of sorts, and asked him what had happened. In answer he told me he had just had a row with his foreman, meaning Tracy Unwin, as you all understand. He said that he had turned the young fellow off—kicked him out, were the exact words he used."

"We are to consider you under oath, of course, Mr. Dillon?" softly asked Pistol Johnny.

"Swear me, if you like," coldly.

"I'd just as soon believe your word as your oath," with a painfully polite bow that did not take the keen edge off his words. "Fortunate, isn't it? Since I would be at a sore loss to know in just which direction to look for a Testament."

Jay Dillon flushed hotly, and his voice trembled as he turned to the judge, demanding:

"Am I compelled to bear with such vile insults, sir?"

"Is it an insult to say that your word is good as your oath?" the little sport asked, with arching brows. "Then I take it back!"

A low laugh ran through the gathering, and Jay Dillon recovered his temper with an effort. He could not afford to bandy words just then. He saw that his cunning adversary only sought to heat his blood and rob him of his cool wits.

"I ask that one of those two men be called to testify," he said, once more as cold as ice to all outward seeming, and at a sign Pitt Bynight and Hod Geary both started forward.

"One at a time, and you'll last longer," smiled Pistol Johnny. "If your ears were soundly plugged, I'd rather both spoke at once; it would be amusing to see how completely you could contradict each other. As it is—Painted-eyes, we'll turn you outside-in the first!"

Hod Geary flashed a vicious glance at the speaker, but stepped forward in dogged silence.

"Tell the judge just what you saw and heard at the mine, Geary. Speak the plain truth, and never mind what yonder glib-tongued fellow

chips in. Luckily he dares use no worse weapon!"

"I work on the Last Hope. The boss hires me by the day. Young Unwin acts as foreman over us. Leastwise, he did, up to yest'day. Then the boss kicked him out, an'—"

"With which foot, witness?" curtly interjected Pistol Johnny.

"Waal, ef he didn't jest kick—"

"You were lying; just as I expected from your face. Give us some more of the same sort, won't you?" blandly uttered the little sport.

"The witness was speaking figuratively, of course," impatiently uttered Jay Dillon.

"And that don't count in a trifling case of this sort; only a man being charged with murder! What's the use in being particular? Why not hang him first off, and so spare valuable breath?"

"Order, gentlemen!" sharply cried Hampton. "Let the witness give his testimony, and do your questioning afterward."

"Thar was a row," doggedly continued Hod Geary. "The sound o' the boss speaking hot, like, drug me thar, but he motioned fer me to git back. I went a ways, but I stopped nigh enough to hear the boss tell Unwin to pull out o' that afore he made his heels break his neck. An' to hear the foreman turn away, sayin' that he'd go, but he'd make the boss sweat blood fer kickin' him out. An' that's all I know 'bout the case."

"You can step to one side for a bit, Painted-eyes; but don't melt into nothingness, for I may want to ask you a few questions before the hanging comes off. Now, Black-mug, we'll listen to you for a bit."

Pitt Bynight stepped forward, but he simply corroborated his mate, adding nothing to the testimony given by Geary.

Tracy Unwin stepped forward, unheeding the muttered remonstrance of his advocate. His face was pale and lined, but his voice was steady and clear as he began to speak:

"Since this matter has been brought up, I wish to say a word or two on my own behalf. Those men lied when they said I quarreled with Thompson Jones."

"Then he lied to me when he said he had discharged you?" sharply asked Jay Dillon.

"I do not deny the discharge," was the cold response. "He *did* discharge me, and I'll tell you for what reason. All of you know that Thompson Jones is—or was—of a peculiar disposition. You would realize this even more painfully if you knew the story of his past life, as I know it."

"You have never heard him speak of a wife or family, yet he had both. I came here a stranger to him, though I knew his past perfectly. I came here expressly to find him, and to accomplish a certain end—"

"As those blood-marks in yonder can testify!" cried Dillon.

Tracy Unwin did not even glance toward the vicious speaker.

"That end was to reconcile a father to his children. I fancied I had nearly accomplished this, though without actually telling my story. In this belief, I sent word to his family, who were still in ignorance of his whereabouts, or even that he was still alive. And when he told me, yesterday, that he thought of writing to his old home, I unfortunately confessed that I had already sent the information, and—"

"When? when did you send that letter?" snarled Jay Dillon, baring his white teeth until his face took on a wolfish look as he started forward, to recoil as Pistol Johnny retorted:

"Call it a week, or any other date that best suits your books, Jay Dillon. One would almost think you had some secret reason for wishing that letter were never written!"

"My admission made the old gentleman angry, and he bade me consider myself discharged from his service. Only that, as high Heaven hears my words! I never gave him an angry word. I never even dreamed of threatening him. For—God hears me when I say it! I would have laid down my life to preserve his! For—gentlemen, his daughter is my promised wife!"

The crowd moved uneasily. Rough, rude though the majority, they had hearts to feel. And not one who heard that trembling voice, not one who saw that paling face and dimming eyes, could doubt the truth.

Tracy Unwin fell back, and Jay Dillon stepped forward, once more master of himself, once more cold and keen in outward seeming.

"I have nothing more to say on this point, your Honor. I simply told the truth when I gave the precise words as used by Thompson Jones. Whether or no he and the foreman had a row; whether or no the old gentleman kicked him out: those were the precise terms he made use of."

"Now I will repeat what I have said before: only wishing you were provided with a Testament to take my sacred oath: not that it would alter my evidence one iota, but to spare you more vile insinuations such as scoffing lips have already regaled your ears with."

"I chanced to come here, just before noon this day. I say chance, though I firmly believe that the finger of fate was in it all! I feel that

the spirit of a murdered man was dragging me to the scene of blood, to make me an avenger!"

"All of which may sound like poetry, but it isn't evidence nor yet law," curtly interjected Pistol Johnny, with an admirably feigned yawn.

"I found the bloody corpse of Thompson Jones lying on yonder floor," rapidly added the gambler, his voice growing deeper, more earnest if that could be. "As soon as my natural horror would permit, I knelt by his side, to see if I could aid him in any manner; but it took only one glance to assure me of his death. And then—for the first time I noticed the rude letters which his poor finger had painfully traced on the floor! A finger dipped in the blood that came from his own great heart, gentlemen! Written while he was dying, no doubt, for his stiffened finger still rested on the last letter of that name—the name of the wretch whom, with his dying effort, he denounced as his assassin—the name of Tracy Unwin!"

The black eyes glowed redly as a low, ugly muttering ran around the half-circle. In that moment Jay Dillon felt that his desperate game was well-nigh won. He felt that he need only lift his voice once more to send a half hundred strong hands at the throat of the man whom he had sworn in his heart should never see the sun set that day!

But before he could utter that last fierce appeal, Pistol Johnny stepped forward with uplifted hand. And with marvelous suddenness an almost painful silence followed that ugly growling note.

"I've only one fault to find with the evidence so eloquently delivered by Mr. Dillon," coldly uttered the little sport, his gray eyes glittering like orbs of polished steel. "That fault is easily named: his testimony is false! He swears that Tracy Unwin killed Thompson Jones. I say he did not. And to prove it—open your ears, I beg, gentlemen. I am the man—I turned the old gent toes-up, myself!"

CHAPTER VII.

A NERVY LITTLE DUDE.

THE two stout ruffians selected by Garl Megilp as best fitted for accomplishing the abduction or capture of Howard Carter, found their purpose vastly aided by the vile poison almost unconsciously swallowed by the little dude in Dimple Dick's Den. They expected a struggle of some sort, and even a possible alarm, through which they might have to fight or lie their way; but they were most agreeably disappointed.

"Full to the lips," no sooner did Howard Carter stagger out where the cool, pure air of night could strike him, than his brain suddenly deadened, his limbs paralyzing until they could scarcely uphold his light weight. And had not the two toughs been lying close at hand, the little dude would almost surely have fallen unconscious before reaching the first turning in his blind attempt to regain the hotel.

"Jest as easy!" chuckled one of the roughs, his practiced touch telling him just how the case stood without a closer examination. "Not trouble enough to make it interestin'. Ah, whisky, you're the devil!"

"Button up," growled his mate, with a swift glance around them as though expecting some unwelcome intruder. "Business!"

He picked up the limp figure, hurrying with it to a point where the shadows lay still deeper, a little removed from the main track. He set his captive upon his own feet, steadying him lightly as he made a few forward steps, critically watching the result. A low, satisfied grunt came from his bearded lips as he stopped short and permitted Howard Carter to drop in a heap to the ground, the muffler still well wrapped about his head and shoulders.

"It'll work, pard," the taller ruffian muttered, his eyes constantly roving about on guard. "Thar's starch enough in his legs fer to do the totin' ef we take the trouble to steer."

"I kin tuck him under a arm an' never know he was thar, unless by the smell o' Dimple Dick's bad whisky," laughed the other.

"He's little enough, but that don't count," was the swift retort. "It ain't the heft nur yit the trouble, but the looks o' the thing. We don't want to come in fer no after-clap, ye understand? The gal'll make a heap row when the little kid turns up missin', an' they'll be heap chin-music over it at the best. What ef somebody was to ketch glimps o' us totin' a bundle o' somethin' out o' town at this hour? Wouldn't they smoke a rat? Wouldn't they ax mighty loud what we hed to say fer our own selves? Wouldn't they?"

"That's what!" grunted the other, rubbing his bristling chin dubiously. "But we got to git shet o' the critter somehow."

"I'll fix him so the gal herself wouldn't know him in the dark," chuckled his mate, bending over the little dude, untwisting the muffler with one hand ready to stifle and cut short any possible outcry. "I'll make it so the critter kin tote himself out o' town, with a little help from us two—see?"

"All three both on us drunk—eh?"

"That's *what*!" with malicious emphasis.

Howard Carter was drunk, beyond the possibility of dispute, but his brain was not entirely

deadened. He was vaguely conscious that he had fallen among thieves, and with each minute that passed by this knowledge grew stronger and clearer, surely if slowly dissipating the benumbing effects of the bad whisky he had swallowed in Dimple Dick's den. Even as the two roughs consulted over him in the shadow, he knew that they meant him evil, though he was unable to offer anything like resistance.

Nimble hands reversed his coat, ripping a hole here and leaving a fluttering tatter there, rubbed clay over the too white linen, and ruthlessly crushed in the silk hat until it was only high enough to rest on that blonde head.

"Now ketch hold, pard, an' try to make out the little cuss is holdin' the both o' us up. We're all full to the chin, climbin' out o' the wilderness fer to start in on the week level with the sun—so!"

With Howard Carter between them, the two roughs set off, staggering and laying a very crooked trail, yet making fair time out of Gold Hills. Any person meeting or noting them just then, would have taken oath they were three miners gloriously drunk, leaving camp after their Sunday spree.

Howard Carter kept his feet far better than his captors had believed possible before the attempt was made. So well, in fact, that the taller rascal growled out a warning to his mate not to talk too free. And as soon as they could feel reasonably free from fearing an awkward encounter in carrying off their prize, a halt was called and the more suspicious rascal looked the little dude over.

"You ain't so mighty drunk but what you kin make out plain talk, I don't reckon," growled the ruffian, keeping his face in the deeper shade while making the examination. "Don't think to try on any dirty tricks. Don't lift them pipes o' yours louder than a grasshopper kin sing. Don't bother your brain tryin' fer to write a map onto it; fer it hain't wuth the trouble. You'll never try to foller the back trail!"

Still stupefied by the vile liquor he had almost unconsciously absorbed while listening to and questioning Garl Megilp, Howard Carter could not mistake the deadly meaning lying underneath those words, and a cold shiver shook his slender frame. His tongue seemed locked, but the shock helped to weaken that mental paralysis. He felt that the cloud was passing away from his brain. That his limbs were growing stronger. That his intoxication was rapidly passing away.

Though he spoke not a word, the keen, wild-beast eyes of his captor seemed to read something of this sort, for he suddenly replaced that heavy muffler, his strong grip tightening upon his prisoner.

Howard Carter could just make out that the two ruffians exchanged a few hasty words, when he felt himself lifted to his feet and a harsh voice growled at his ear:

"Keep movin', critter! An' don't you try fer to kick over the traces unless you're mighty hungry fer the whip!"

"An' that means a whip with a steel cracker a foot long, mind ye!" came a still more savage warning from the opposite side.

The captive made no reply, partly because the heavy muffler made this an impossibility, partly because he was straining every energy in clearing his brain. Shaken though his wits were, he knew that this bold kidnapping meant more than simple robbery. If gain alone had been the object, the rough rascals would have emptied his pockets back in Gold Hills, without taking all this extra trouble and risk. And yet, if not simple robbery, what could their object be?

A stranger in a strange region, he surely could not have made any vindictive enemies.

Away from Gold Hills, plunging deeper into the broken country, winding through rocky defiles, clambering up difficult steeps or slipping and sliding down abrupt slopes. On without pause for rest or breath until the mining-camp was long lost to view, and Howard Carter had not the ghost of an idea whither or in what direction they were tramping.

Then came a pause, and the heavy muffler was taken from about his head, though a strong grip still remained on one of his arms.

Instantly he looked at his captors, instinctively trying to mark them for future recognition; but he had his trouble for his pains.

Over each face was drawn a mask or disguising handkerchief, hiding all save the evil eyes that glittered through ragged slits with a mocking light. Nor was there aught in the garb of either rascal by which their prisoner could hope to recall or recognize them hereafter; both were dressed in the ordinary rough wear of a laborer of the mines.

"It wouldn't do you any good, even ef you could, little runt," one of the fellows chuckled in a voice that was plainly assumed for the occasion. "You never see us afore this night, nur you won't never see us ag'in after it—onless what the Gospel sharps say 'bout a howlin' hereafter is got a bottom o' solid truth into it! An' then I reckon you won't hev time nur wantin' to kick up a row 'long o' this trick!"

"What do you expect to gain by this outrage?"

"Ain't nigh as drunk as you let on, be ye?" grinned the other tough. "Bigger fool you! Don't git hafe-good out of a jamboree, you don't!"

"What we expect, we'll git, don't you worry, pard," cut in the first speaker. "Ef you're in a hurry to find that out, keep pickin' up your feet an' settin' 'em down ahead o' each other. We'll keep you from losin' the trail, so don't pester your brains over that. Mosey, runt!"

Without a word of remonstrance Howard Carter obeyed, walking between the two roughs, following one and having the other tramping hard at his heels. At least this was better than a blind progress such as had been his until now.

Cautiously, guardedly, he tried to locate himself by the bright stars, but in vain. Even before he made the attempt, he realized how utterly hopeless it was. He knew nothing of the country. He could not tell north from south. He had no idea at which point of the compass they had left Gold Hills. But of one thing he soon became convinced; his captors were leading him in anything but a direct line.

The stars told him this much. Part of the crooked windings might be accounted for by the broken ground, but not all. Beyond a doubt the two rascals were purposely confusing his sense of location.

This belief was not altogether a disagreeable one, since so much trouble would hardly be taken without an object. If they meant to kill him, would they care aught about his keeping a record of their trail?

With his mind partly at ease on this point, Howard Carter forced himself to go over, step by step, every move he had made since reaching Gold Hills. His peril had cleared his brain and steadied his wits. He could even recall all that he had done and said while falling under the spell of Dimple Dick's vile whisky.

He felt that his captivity had something to do with his main object in coming to that lawless region; but just what or why he could not determine.

He was no nearer the end when the sound of a clear, peculiar whistle came to their ears from no great distance.

"All right, boss!" called out one of his captors. "We're as nigh on time as we could manage it."

"Well for you if you can prove that!" answered a harsh, croaking voice as a tall shape dimly revealed itself a short distance ahead. "I've been waiting here since sunset!"

"Overland didn't git in until after dark, an' then we hed to trap the bird," humbly muttered the rough, giving his captive a push that sent him face to face with the unknown.

The little dude did not stop when the impulse of that push died out. He leaped straight at the tall figure, sending out his clinched fist viciously, hoping to effect his escape by the very suddenness of that assault.

But he had to deal with a man whom few could take off his guard, and an iron grip closed upon his wrist, twisting him aside as a foot deftly kicked both legs from under him. The little dude fell heavily on his back, and before he could make an effort to arise, a foot pressed sharply on his breast, holding him helpless.

"You would if you could, but if you can't, how can you?" laughed the stranger, harshly, contemptuously. "Get up and behave yourself, unless you want me to take you across my knee!"

The two roughs sprung forward as the tall man removed his foot, rudely jerking the captive to his feet.

"Shell we clap a hitch onto his paws, boss?" asked one.

"For his own sake, if you like," was the careless response.

Stunned by his heavy fall, Howard Carter could offer but slight resistance to those strong hands, and after a brief attempt to free himself, he desisted.

"Better for you had you shown the same amount of good sense at the outset," laughed the tall stranger.

Howard Carter gazed at him keenly, trying to recognize the shape; for the first glance told him a snug-fitting mask of some dark material covered his face from view. But he had his pains for his reward.

A man standing a little over the average height, but without a single peculiarity in shape or figure, unless it might be the stoop, or rounded shoulders, such as a man will acquire through long bending over a desk. Even that might be assumed for the occasion.

The stranger laughed low, but with that strange harshness which Howard Carter had noticed from the very first.

"Look your fill, my gentle pilgrim, but I hardly think it will pay you for the trouble. Even if we were old acquaintances—even if we had met a thousand times before this—what matter? For the odds are mighty that you and I will never meet after this night, or in this world!"

"Then I'll try my level best to even-up in the other world!" the nervy little dude said, his tones cold yet menacing.

"Shell we give him a root to chew onto, boss?"

"No; I want him to talk," was the cold response, as the man in the mask sat down on a convenient stone. "At the same time, my gentle dude, it will do no particular harm to either of us if you will bear in mind that I am here on business, pure and simple."

"Lead out, then," coldly retorted Carter, his blue eyes flashing with repressed anger. "Show your hand, and I'll tell you just what I think of it."

"That's more like it!" with a mocking bow and a short, hard laugh. "It's worth all the trouble I have taken, just to pass a few words with a gentleman of your truly admirable disposition; so prompt, so quick to comprehend, so—may I add—ready to accept the inevitable?"

"One of you rascals lie down and give me a warm seat. Then wake me up when that wind-mill gets down to sober business, will you?"

"Cool, but decidedly Kirby-ish, don't you know?" drawled the man in a mask; then adding sharply: "You want business? All right; you shall have it, without further preface."

"Your name is Howard Carter. You are on your way to Top Notch. You have a certain interest in a mining-claim known as Last Hope. Am I right as far as I have gone?"

"If you think so, what matter?"

"Bah!" with another disagreeable laugh. "You choke at telling a lie, yet think to win a game like this by plotting and scheming? All right, if you prefer it that way! We'll make believe you are just what you call yourself, and that your only object in taking this trip is what you lay claim to. What matter, as you say? Not an iota to me!"

"You are not wanted in this section, Howard Carter," with a sneering emphasis on the name that made the prisoner give a slight start despite his assumed coolness. "You have got to turn tail, or turn toes up to the daisies! Which course do you favor most?"

"I can tell better when you show your hand a little more plainly."

"I'll not leave you even that thin excuse for evading a decision. You are not wanted here; neither you nor the lady with whom you travel. Overland Jeemes goes back to Silver City tomorrow. Swear that you will book and occupy two seats in his hearse on that trip, and thus escape a serious attack of heart disease."

"If I agree to this, I may return to Gold Hills unharmed?" slowly demanded Carter, gazing steadily into those glittering eyes as they shone through the twin apertures in the sable mask.

"If you swear to never turn your face toward Gold Hills after you leave it in charge of Overland—yes! If you swear—I'll dictate the oath, and take care to make it binding even upon your conscience—to never return; never to write a letter to any person now in this section; never to send word of mouth; never to send an agent out here to take up the thread as you are forced to drop it—yes!"

"And if I refuse?"

"Wait a bit before you ask that question, young man. If you take the pledge I propose, you might feel tempted to violate it. You will be watched by keen eyes and kept within reach of strong, sure hands. The first will surely detect any attempt to evade your pledge, and the last will surely, certainly punish such perjury!"

"If an oath is not taken, it can't be violated," was the cold retort. "I don't acknowledge your authority. I don't admit your right to exact any such oath. And even if I did, I'd never take it on compulsion."

"Try and count up what your words amount to, Howard Carter!"

"I never talk at random. You have my decision."

"For your own sake I'll not accept it as final," and the harsh voice grew graver, more earnest. "I'd rather not have your blood on my hands. I'd rather run some little risks and let you live on until you have completed your little span. But back you must go—or fill a nameless grave out here in the wilderness!"

"Not before I get even with you for this outrage," coldly retorted Carter, his blue eyes fairly blazing. "You hide your face, but I'd recognize that voice among ten thousand! Through it I'll find you, though you hide in the center of the earth!"

"Or might if your temper hadn't run away with your poor wits," sneeringly laughed the mask. "You poor fool!" with vicious sternness. "You are digging a grave with your own tongue! You dare to threaten me with vengeance—bah!" flinging out a gloved hand with a gesture of contempt. "You are a spoilt child, and I am treating you as though you were a man in size, in powers, in sense!"

"Which shows you are wiser than you thought," sharply retorted the captive, his slender form rigidly erect, his eyes all aglow. "You affect to sneer at my size. All right. I'm not as big as a mountain, I'm free to confess. I don't weigh a ton, even with my boots on. But with all these disadvantages, I'm a man—and a man such as never trod in your stockings!"

"Viewed through the wrong end of the glass?"

"Little as I am, I don't have to hire hands to

carry out my plans and do the dangerous work. Little as I am, you dare not bid these rascals free my hands and stand aside to see me thrash their master until he howls for mercy like the cur he is! Not even after this!"

And as he spoke the last words, Howard Carter bent forward and spat full into the masked face.

The man thus insulted never lifted a hand, never moved from his seat, though the two roughs sprung forward and grasped the nervy little dude, though too late to entirely foil his purpose.

And the harsh, croaking voice was cold and even as its owner spoke:

"If you were one-half as brave as you try to make out, Howard Carter, you would have waited to do that until your hands were free. Even a cur such as you affect to think me, would hesitate before striking a man whose arms are bound."

"Set them free, and I'll try again!" panted the captive, breathless from his desperate struggles to break away from his assailants.

"I'd kill you before you could purse up your lips, you vile pigmy! That will be the final outcome, I feel assured, but I'm a man who never strays aside from the trail first lined out. I decided to give you every fair chance to escape with life, and I'll keep that unwritten pledge."

"Once more—will you take the oath I ask?"

"No—a thousand times, no!"

"Once will suffice, when I decide to accept it as final," was the icy retort. "You left a sister down in Gold Hills, I believe?"

"Harm a hair of her head, you devil, and—"

"Stop his jaws for a bit, lads, treat him as you would a spoilt child, and don't hurt him—so!" as a broad, horny palm was closed over the lips of the captive. "Now I'll go on at my ease."

"If you decline to take the chance to offer you for your own sake, Howard Carter, I ask you to do so for the sake of your sister. I don't like to war against fair woman, but needs must, you know! Without your all-powerful arm to protect her—without a friend or even an acquaintance in a strange, heathenish region like this—what think you will become of that dainty beauty!"

A stifled groan rose in the throat of the helpless captive, and the man in the mask made a sign which was instantly followed by a removal of that gagging hand.

"Harm one hair of her head, you devil, and I'll never know rest while your cowardly form cumbered this earth!" hoarsely gasped Carter.

"There is but one way to spare your sister," was the ice-cold retort. "Take the oath I stand ready to dictate, and—"

"I'll see you a thousand fathoms deep in the hottest pit of Tophet first!" grated the infuriated captive.

"That settles it, then!" rising from his seat and shaking himself. "You know what to do, lads, and I leave the rest in your hands. If you fail to make him listen to reason, drop him!"

Without another word the man in the mask strode rapidly away, soon losing himself in the deep shadows cast by the towering rocks.

Howard Carter again tried to break away, only to be caught and held helpless by the grinning ruffians, one of whom uttered:

"I mire your pluck, banty, but don't bank a cent onto your judgment! The loss offered you a heap fairer shake then he's in the habit o' givin' them as crosses his trail, but you throwed it over your shoulder like it didn't smell good!"

"Waal, he's got one chaine left, 'ordin' to orders," cut in the other rascal, in gruff tones. "Time's creepin' on, pard, an' they's heap good whisky down to Gold Hills! Le's git a move onto us!"

"Ship-shape an' Bristol fashion, mate," chuckled the less impatient member. "A nod 'll do jest as good as a howl, an' so—tidy, banty! Ef you don't nod yes, you hain't got no furdur use fer that clapper o' yours!" and he deftly whipped a knotted handkerchief over the face of his captive, pressing the hard knot between his teeth, effectually gagging him.

Picking the slender form up in his brawny arms, he strode on through the night, once relieved by his no less muscular mate, at length pausing in a wild, gloomy hollow. Placing Howard Carter upon his feet, the fellow forced his head forward and downward as he chuckled:

"Never mind ef you be dizzy-headed, banty—I'll keep you on a level fer a bit, anyway! Take a squint, will you?"

At their feet yawned the slightly shelving mouth of a hole of some description, its bare edges alone visible, with a center of gloom.

As he looked, an involuntary shiver crept over the form of the prisoner, and his captor stepped back with a grim chuckle.

"Tain't much fer looks in the dark, banty, but it's heap enough ef you still stick out contrary! That's a hole many a man hes gone down an' come up ag'in in other days, but it's so deep that ef you go down to-night, I'm turribly skeered you'll never come up ag'in afore Gabri'l toots his dinner-horn!"

"Ef I didn't know better, I'd think you was

foolish drunk, pard!" growled the surly ruffian. "Durn the palaver! That's a old shaft, petered out this ten year. It's deep enough to kill any livin' critter that fell down it, but you've got to make the trip ef you don't come to Limerick—dead sure!"

"Them's the orders, banty, an' we prides ourselves on 'beyin' orders, no matter who gits broke to pieces. This time I do reckon it'll be you, ef you still hold out rusty!"

"Look yer!" growled the other rascal, stooping and selecting a stone from among those lying around, knocking it against another as he turned his face upward to make sure the prisoner was watching. "Fetch him up ag'in, pard," rising and striding to the edge of the shaft.

This gruff order was promptly obeyed. And holding his right hand far over the yawning pit, he opened his fingers. Into the gloom dropped the grayish object, but there came back no sound, though Howard Carter, despite himself, strained his ears to listen.

"I ain't smart at figgers, 'cept the spots on keerds," chuckled the rascal who held Carter. "I cain't count up jest how deep a hole wants to be to kill the sound of a dornick like that in comin' back. But I do know it's deep enough to do you up ef we hev to drap you down yen' ways!" and he removed the gag.

"Sw'ar you'll knuckle down to the boss an' we'll call him back in a holy hurry, critter," growled the surly tough, his eyes glowing through the ragged slit. "No foolishin', mind ye! A clean knuckle, or—"

"You dare not commit such a horrible—"

"Swing him across, pard!" grated the rascal, grasping the helpless man, and in another moment Howard Carter was held struggling over the black pit, while a voice harshly demanded:

"Fer the last time, will you knuckle down to the boss?"

"Never, you demons!" gasped the doomed man.

"Then down you go, durn ye!" snarled the ruffian, loosing his grip.

With a gasping, choking cry, Howard Carter shot swiftly downward!

CHAPTER VIII.

PISTOL JOHNNY MAKES HIS MARK.

If Pistol Johnny was playing for a sensation, then the result of his last words must have filled his heart to overflowing.

The judge sprung to his feet so suddenly that both pistols were cast to the ground, but fortunately without exploding.

Jay Dillon shrunk back with a stifled cry that was between a curse and groan, his eyes staring wildly, his lips curling back from his white teeth, his hands tightly clinched; but only for a single breath. Then, as cries and words of wonder broke from the startled semicircle, he drew himself erect, struggling for his usual nerve.

The clear, mellow laugh that so suddenly broke from the lips of the little sport may have helped him in this.

"Well, if I didn't know better, I'd feel powerfully tempted to believe I'd run smack up against a lunatic asylum out for a holiday!" cried Pistol Johnny, springing forward and picking up the weapons dropped by George Hampton, delivering them with a cheerful nod.

"You said it—you murdered Thompson Jones?" gasped the judge, too greatly amazed to fully comprehend what he was saying.

Pistol Johnny arched his brows, giving vent to a long, low whistle as he slowly glanced about him, *seeming* to note the intense excitement for the first time.

"And you're kicking up all this bobbery about just that? With men so plenty and cheap and—"

"The fellow is playing some devilish trick, thinking to get Tracy Unwin off during the confusion!" sharply cried Jay Dillon. "Watch him, men! Drop him in his tracks if he dares—"

"And Jay Dillon will finish telling you how your friend came by his death," with a cold, disagreeable laugh that drove the red spots from the cheeks of the tall gambler.

"Steady, men!" sternly called out George Hampton, slow to move as usual, but making up in emphasis what he lacked in spryness. "We've got to get at the bottom facts if it takes a month. I'll shoot the first man who tries to strike a blow or fire a shot before we are all satisfied of the truth. And you," turning to Pistol Johnny, his brown eyes glowing with mingled suspicion and dislike, "talk straight. Do you want us to really believe you murdered Thompson Jones?"

"Not a bit of it, judge," was the brisk response.

"Then—what in the foul fiend's name do you mean?" angrily.

"Killing is not always murder. A man may turn the toes of another up to the daisies without butchering him. If you were to catch a man in the night ramming a pillow down the delicate throat of your wife, and happened to turn *him* toes-up, would you call that a murder?"

Jay Dillon forced a laugh, hard and vicious.

"That theory won't work here nor in this

case, for the dead man bore witness that he was murdered—and by Tracy Unwin!"

"Will you trot out your evidence, pardner?" blandly asked Pistol Johnny.

This was a center shot, and despite his efforts to the contrary, Jay Dillon could not entirely avoid showing as much. Eternal curses wither the hand that interfered with his carefully-laid plans!

"I believe it was *you*, you cool rascal!" he grated, a hand instinctively dropping to his hip in quest of the deadly weapon habitually worn there in ready reach.

"Well, who said it wasn't? Jay, you're growing tiresome. Not content with bringing us all out here in search of a mare's nest, you won't even let me tell the company just how it all come about. You've proven pretty plainly that you know nothing whatever about the case, and now you might have the common decency to fall back a bit while I inform this gallant assembly just how, why and who struck Billy Patterson."

"Give him room fer to hang himself, then we'll run his mate up a tree to keep him company!" growled Pitt Bynight, viciously.

Jay Dillon fell back a pace or two, folding his arms tightly over his swelling chest, an ugly light filling his jetty orbs.

"Have your fling for all of me. But mark this: I'll run you to earth in the end—you and yonder red-handed assassin!"

Pistol Johnny suddenly grew grave, his face lengthening marvelously, his eyes seeming to sink deeper into their sockets, his voice becoming deep-toned and almost sepulchral as he slowly uttered:

"Your Honor, judge and jury: and you, honest citizens of glorious Top Notch, Queen City of the cloud-crowned mountains! Lend me your ears for a brief space, and I'll fill them to overflowing with as sad and mournful a tale of man's perfidy and weak but willing woman's wrongs as ever found record in high Heaven or its lowly antipodes!"

Judge Hampton shifted uneasily on his seat. He could not help being strongly impressed by the solemn, tragic manner of this remarkable being, but his words seemed to verge perilously near the burlesque.

"What has all this to do with the subject in hand?" he ventured.

"Bunt me off the rails at your peril, judge and jury!" frowned Pistol Johnny, with a scowl that was ferocious enough for a cannibal. "I'm little, but I'm high pressure, and hold steam enough to take the hair off of everything within a radius of forty rods if I let go all bolts and come down bust! Where was I? Oh—yes!"

"There was a woman of beauty rare and virtue enormous, dear fellows! I knew her well—too well, I used to think at times, when across her checkered apron she would yank me and—pardon these tears, my good friends! I can't help it—I was built that way!"

His voice husky, his trembling fingers casting aside imaginary tears, Pistol Johnny broke off. Despite the gravity of the cause which drew them together, the citizens could not quite refrain from smiling, and some so audibly that George Hampton frowned darkly, more than half convinced that this audacious fellow was trying to turn all to ridicule.

"If this is a joke—" he began, only to be cut short with:

"Did you ever have a mother, or a grandmother, your Honor?"

"What has that got to do with this case?" frowned the judge.

"I had both, and they each wore a number seven slipper; but I digress. Pardon me," with a low and humble bow, then rising erect, the personification of dignified melancholy. "It is no easy task to tear down the gloomy pall which the kindly hand of old Time has drawn before the grim and cankering past; but give me time and I'll get there!"

"Into the beautiful garden of Eden crept a serpent, bent on playing a confidence game with fair Eve. And into another Eden stole a two-legged reptile, with his wardrobe filled to overflowing with cold decks, and every back bearing his private mark. Think of it—but maybe you'd better wait until I get a little further along."

"Come to the point, or dry up!" growled Hampton, frowningly.

"Lovely woman—treacherous man—whispered vows—sighs and vows and tears and kisses!" rapidly uttered Pistol Johnny, keeping time with forefinger on outstretched palm. "Man lied and woman believed him. Man run away and took woman with him. Elopement; private marriage; robbed of wealth; deserted; notesaying that preacher was a fraud; hysterics; swoons; death; legacy of vengeance, with my name as sole legatee."

Pistol Johnny flung out both hands, drawing his lithe figure to its extreme height, his manner and tones altering abruptly as he added:

"Your Honor, and you, citizens of Top Notch. I accepted that sacred legacy just as any honest man among your number would have done under similar circumstances. I took a solemn oath to never know rest or repose until I had run the villain to earth and punished him to the full extent of the law—legal or moral, just as best

suited the locality in which I might overtake the criminal.

"That man's name was Thompson Jones. His victim was my grandmotaer, then a mild and innocent maiden of sixty summers, whose—"

"Must we bear this buffoonry, any longer, judge?" sharply cried Jay Dillon, as the crowd broke into a laugh at the ridiculous climax.

"I'm running this little circus, Jay-bird, and if you don't like the performance, call at the door and get your money back. You've had *your* turn, and don't show professional jealousy by trying to queer *my* act—it isn't white—and it's unhealthy."

"Your Honor," turning again to the bewildered judge, and speaking rapidly. "I found the base deceiver right back of where you are now sitting. I recalled his heartless crime, and gave him just ten seconds to prepare for the after-clap. And then, with a revolver at his back and a cheese-knife in front, I tried my best to make a fair connection between the two metals."

"You killed him?" stammered the judge, staring blankly into that enigmatical countenance.

"You confess that? Then—where is the body?"

"Had to do it, don't you see?" placidly responded the Cool Hand, a bland smile upon his face. "Old lady might have haunted my virtuous couch, else. *Had to*—so I did it, of course. As for the body—well, I had to get shut of it in some manner, so—I ate him, body, boots, and breeches!"

The crowd broke into an undisguised laugh, and the judge rose to his feet, pale with passion, his eyes glowing dangerously, his hands grasping his revolvers after the fashion of a man who means to use them. But Pistol Johnny never flinched.

"I beg your pardon, judge," he said, all trace of levity disappearing from voice, face and manner. "I admit that I have been playing the fool, but look at it from our standpoint, and see if I hadn't some excuse. Recall the fairy-tale Jay Dillon has given you. Is mine any more ridiculous than his? At least I have one plain fact to back my story: I *did* have a grandmother!"

Despite himself, George Hampton could not help smiling at that conclusion. If anything, his sympathies were with Jay Dillon, but he could not help seeing that the latter had failed woefully in proving the dark accusation he had brought against Tracy Unwin. The red writing on the floor of the Lone Cabin was all there remained to tell of a tragedy; and that writing was in startling contrast to what Dillon swore he would and could show them. If it had been altered, would not the marks show more freshly?

"Yes," added Pistol Johnny, growing serious once more, his voice ringing out cold and stern, his gray eyes glowing dangerously as they turned upon the pale face of the gambler. "I had a grandmother, and so I can point out one solid truth in my mass of lies. Can you do as well, Jay Dillon? Can you show even the ghost of a fact to bolster up your foul snarl of lies?"

"I can prove every word I said!" viciously.

"Do so, and I agree to fit the noose about the throat of Tracy Unwin with my own hands!"

"You may find your hands full in keeping your own throat in good breathing condition. Men of Top Notch—"

"Men of Top Notch, hold your peace until this fellow makes his words good!" sharply interjected Pistol Johnny, one of the tools which had earned him that title gleaming in his right hand. "If he fails to do so—as he surely will—write him down a cowardly liar, cur and perjurer!"

White as death, but showing his teeth viciously, Jay Dillon faced the Cool Hand, sneering:

"Finish your work by shooting a man with empty hands, why don't you? Shall I shut my eyes, or turn my back, to lend you grit enough?"

"I pulled a gun to show better men that I meant plain business," was the quick retort.

"All I ask of them is a fair hearing. As for you—see how easily I can riddle your pretended proofs!"

Before he could say more, George Hampton came to the front, hard and business-like.

"Talk to me, if you must talk, John Woodcock. These gentlemen insisted on my filling this position, greatly against my will. Both of you agreed to accept me as judge. You've rather got away with me up to this, but I'll hold you both level from this out, if I have to enforce order by shooting it into you! I mean it, mind you!"

Sharp and clear the judge uttered these words, then returned to his position on the step, revolver in hand, his honest face hard-set and resolute. A subdued cheer came from the semicircle. Sport was good enough in its proper time and place, but the mystery of those red letters was yet unsolved: the fate of Thompson Jones still hung in the balance.

Time enough for these two sports to settle their personal difference when this black charge was proven true or false.

"Your Honor is right," howled Pistol Johnny, gravely. "And right is just what we are trying to get at, so far as our side is concerned."

"Mr. Dillon openly charges my client with killing one Thompson Jones. He swears that he came here at or near noon of this very day, and made the discovery of a tragedy. He swears that he found Thompson Jones lying on yonder floor, shot in the back and stabbed through the heart, dead. He swears that with his dying gasp, Thompson Jones traced the crime and name of the criminal in blood on the floor. And all this at or near the hour of twelve, this very day, bear in mind."

"We come here, guided by Jay Dillon. He stops us before the but to denounce Tracy Unwin. Did he do that in hopes this crowd would lynch his intended victim before his base lies could be exposed?"

"Peace, Dillon!" hurriedly cried the judge as the tall gambler showed signs of bursting forth in hot rage at those merciless words. "And you, Mr. Woodcock, choose your words a little more carefully."

"If I am saying more than the simple truth, I'm open to correction," was the cold response. "Did Mr. Dillon pick and choose his words when he sought to fasten the brand of Cain on the brow of my friend? When you have to handle a skunk—but I beg pardon of the Court," with a low bow and grim smile. "I am speaking of that fellow again as he is, not as he should be."

"I've got them all recorded, John Woodcock," coldly uttered the gambler. "If we both live long enough, I'll ask you to repeat some of them when we stand on equal footing."

"That will never be," was the swift retort. "I'm bad enough, but I never yet tried to make honest men lynch a gentleman for a crime of which I knew he was innocent as a babe unborn—and you have."

George Hampton sprung to his feet and thrust his pistol back in its scabbard, growling in tones of utter disgust:

"Go it you snarling curs! I throw up the sponge, and the devil may play judge if he likes—I'll no more of it! I can't keep order without shooting both of you, and a dozen such wouldn't pay for two cartridges."

"I'll apologize to you, as man to man, when this little farce is ended, Mr. Hampton," smiled Pistol Johnny, falling back to the side of the man whose cause he was championing, wheeling until their backs were partly guarded by the log cabin. "And now I'll talk to you, men of Top Notch."

"There can be no murder where there is no corpse. Who can say with any certainty that Thompson Jones is dead? Jay Dillon is willing to take his oath to that effect, but what is his oath worth? Not the breath it takes to sound it in your ears. Or, if his oath needs a balance, I'll swear that Thompson Jones is not dead!"

"What have you done with him, then?" grated Dillon, falling back toward the spot where Pitt Bynight and Hod Geary were standing.

Pistol Johnny laughed derisively.

"Is that another charge, Jay-bird?"

Jay Dillon ran a swift glance over the puzzled, doubting crowd, and fancying he might even yet win his desperate game, he cried out:

"Boys, shall our friend and fellow-citizen go unavenged? Will you let that mocking demon rob you of your just vengeance? I swear that I found Thompson Jones in yonder cabin, foully murdered! I swear that his dying finger pointed to Tracy Unwin as his assassin! Will you—"

"Listen to my warble, just for a change, gentlemen," interposed Pistol Johnny, his cool, measured tones in startling contrast to the impassioned outburst of his rival for the moment.

"You know me by reputation, I reckon. Well, I say that Tracy Unwin no more killed Thompson Jones than George Hampton did—and that is foolish. I know this, I tell you. And knowing his perfect innocence, I am backing him, tongue or hand, just as the occasion calls for. You can't touch him without first walking over me—and I've got to be pretty thoroughly rubbed out before playing foot-mat."

"As I said before, let that fellow produce the proofs he talked so glibly about. Let him bring forward Thompson Jones, dead or alive; and then I'll yield up my client for trial according to rule."

"That's fair enough," promptly cried George Hampton, whose wits seemed far more active as a private citizen than while occupying the seat of justice. "We'll keep an eye on Mr. Unwin, and I don't reckon but what he'll turn up for trial."

"In case of necessity, of course," amended Pistol Johnny.

Jay Dillon glanced keenly over the crowd, and choked down a vicious curse as he saw little hope for him there. The men of Top Notch did not seem just in the mood for making a rush on that cool hand, who fingered his tools so easily. He was only one man, but—

"Scatter and hunt for sign!" grated the gambler. "Some one carried off that corpse between this and noon. He must have left some trace of his cunning work. Five hundred dollars out of my own pocket to the man who brings the first positive clew!"

"And I duplicate the offer, gentlemen," promptly cried Pistol Johnny.

Jay Dillon wheeled in his tracks and flashed forth a wad of bank-notes, selecting a number

and thrusting them into the unwilling hand of George Hampton, then grating:

"That shows my sincerity, John Woodcock. Money talks!"

"If it could talk plain English, you wouldn't care to flaunt it in company after that fashion," laughed the little sport, seemingly bent on pushing the gambler into assaulting him before witnesses.

Dillon flushed hotly, but choked back his ire sufficiently to say:

"Shall I stake you?"

"If you like—on good security, of course," placidly.

"Your bare word, no doubt," with a sneering laugh.

"Thanks for your high opinion, but I'd be lying were I to return the compliment with a change of names. I don't carry a paper mill in my pocket, but if you reckon a mine security enough, I can offer one—the Last Hope."

Jay Dillon stared at the speaker, a strange, gray shade creeping over his face. His lips parted, but not a sound issued from them.

No less surprised was George Hampton, but he could speak:

"What have you to do with the Last Hope? Thompson Jones's mine!"

"But Thompson Jones is dead, you know," with a cold smile that belied the peculiar glitter in those keen gray orbs. "Jay Dillon can take oath to that effect. All the same, dead or alive, I'm his agent in charge until he turns up again. If you doubt my assertion, call at my office in town and I'll show you my authority."

Turning, Pistol Johnny slipped a revolver into the hand of his friend, then coldly uttered:

"As we don't believe Thompson Jones is dead, you'll hardly expect us to join in a search for his corpse. It wanted for anything of importance, you can find me in Top Notch. Until then—good-day to all!"

With a hand on the arm of the man whose cause he was championing, Pistol Johnny strode forward, through the path which opened for him in the crowd. His right hand held a pistol with careless ease, but there was something in his glowing eyes that made stout-hearted men shrink from his path far more readily than open threats could have done.

As he saw his intended victim escaping his grasp, Jay Dillon cried out in savage rage to the half-awed crowd:

"Arrest him! Take him, you cowards! He murdered poor Jones, and yet you are letting him go free on a bare bluff like that!"

Fairly driven wild at his defeat, the gambler, frothing at the mouth, sprung to the side of Pitt Bynight and snatched a revolver from its scabbard as he screamed out those wild orders.

The men scattered, knowing right well how little flying lead respects outsiders, and with a clear field before him, Jay Dillon flung up his confiscated weapon and pulled trigger.

At the same instant Pistol Johnny whirled about and his right arm shot out, two reports blending in one.

With a savage howl of pain and rage, Jay Dillon dropped his weapon and staggered back, shaking the red drops from his right hand.

"Down on your marrow-bones and beg, you cur!" challenged the pistol sharp, his gray eyes flashing like balls of fire over his leveled tool.

The staggering gambler tripped and fell, either through accident or intentionally, flinging out his uninjured hand toward the revolver which had dropped from his crippled grasp an instant before.

Swift as thought came another report, and the weapon was knocked beyond his reach by a deftly-planted bullet, while the mocking laugh of Pistol Johnny rung out clearly, followed by the contemptuous words:

"Too thin, Jay-bird! Like all of your dirty tricks this day, that is a flat fizzle! Get up and stop howling, you cur! Only a rap across the knuckles. I could have bored your brain just as easily, but it's a rule of mine to never cheat the hangman until I have to! Only—keep on your side of the fence, unless you want to suffer a heap worse!"

With an arm slipped through that of his companion, Pistol Johnny turned and moved leisurely toward town, never once looking back.

CHAPTER IX.

WHO AND WHAT IS PISTOL JOHNNY?

JAY DILLON turned sick and faint, quite as much from suffocating rage and mortification as from his wound. As through a bloody mist he saw that satanically Cool Hand walking off in careless security with the man whose neck should ere this have been encircled by the noose of the hangman. Saw him moving away without so much as casting a single glance over his shoulder to guard against another shot. Saw this, and felt it more keenly than even the bitter insults he had that day been forced to swallow!

"Drop him, curse you for curs, Geary—By-night!" he gasped as he rose to his knees, brushing his injured hand across his affected vision, leaving a broad band of scarlet across his temples. "Where's my gun? Give me—crippled—crippled for life!"

Almost a shriek the last words, and as though

for the first time fairly realizing his injury, Jay Dillon staggered to his feet, grasping his right wrist with his sound hand, holding the crimsoned member up before his wildly staring eyes.

A shiver shook more frames than one among the men of Top Notch as they looked and listened. There was an agony far more intense than any that could spring from physical pain in that strained, unnatural tone, in that ghastly, blood-banded face.

Crippled! His good right hand worse than useless from that hour!

What did that mean to a man like Jay Dillon? For the time being both Pistol Johnny and Tracy Unwin were forgotten by the crowd; or if not forgotten, at least permitted to go their way without further interruption or molestation.

Geary and Bynight cast darkling glances after them, with itching fingers fumbling at the weapons they bore at their waists; but that was all. Neither one dared risk a shot even at the back of that superlatively Cool Hand after what they had witnessed.

George Hampton was the first man to reach the side of the half-crazed gambler, his olden sympathies fully restored now that his friend was in such sore agony. But as his hand touched an arm, Jay Dillon flung it off, striking a vicious blow at his friend with his sound hand, snarling viciously:

"Hands off! Never alive—never for the—"

"You wouldn't hit a friend, Jay?" sharply interjected Hampton, too strongly agitated to notice this half-betrayal as he surely must have marked it in cooler blood. "Brace up, man! You're all right. Just a bit of bark off the knuckles. Why, you'll never know it in a week from now!"

"He's all shook up—and no wonder!" cried another of the citizens, as he pressed forward with a capacious flask in his hands. "I'm all of a shiver my own self, and all I did was to look on! Here—give him a snifter of this!"

Jay Dillon shook himself clear of them both, but the effort seemed to clear his vision as well, and to restore his senses. The wild, hunted glitter began to die out of his eyes, and as he steadied himself on his legs, the ghost of a smile crept into his ghastly pale face.

"Don't be too hard on a poor devil, gents," he muttered, with a curious weakness in his tones such as no man had ever found there before. "I'm all broke up. It's a hoodoo, I reckon. Crippled—crippled—and my right hand at that!"

He staggered back against the cabin, holding up his bloody hand, staring at it much as a tiny babe stares at its doubled fists; with the same stupid vacancy.

And yet, Jay Dillon was a strong, cool, bold and nervy man. He had stood up against long odds and won when every chance seemed against him, pulled through by those very qualities. Time and again had he played with death, a smile upon his lips and a mocking devil in his eyes. In that wild and almost lawless region he had made for himself a record such as few men of his class have ever equaled.

This complete breakdown seemed doubly strange to the men of Top Notch, knowing all this. True, the tall card-sharp had met with defeat after defeat at the hands of this steel-nerved stranger; but from the very outset Jay Dillon had not acted up to his customary schedule; from the moment when he rushed into Top Notch with those chilling tidings, he had seemed unlike the ice-berg sport they had known so long.

They could know nothing of the terrible strain to which he had been subjected for days past. They could only dimly realize what a stunning shock this mysterious disappearance of the corpse which he had promised to show them had given him.

It meant defeat, meant the utter failure of his carefully-laid plans. And it might mean even more—the gallows.

George Hampton forced a laugh as he again stepped to the side of the gambler, gently touching the blood-dripping hand.

"Crippled? Not a bit of it, pardner!" he said, in cheery tones, as he marked the course of the bullet. "In a week you'll have to look twice before you can tell which knuckles got rapped. I say this, and you've never caught me in a lie yet, have you?"

Jay Dillon brushed his sound hand across his eyes, then gazed at the wounded member as it lay in the strong, kindly grasp of his friend. The bloody mist was beginning to fade away, and his nerves were rallying under that cheering assurance.

The hurt looked ugly enough; some of the bones were splintered, as even his uncertain sight could see in that first glance; but it might easily have been worse. And when he found this assurance, Jay Dillon flashed an eager look about him, his teeth clicking sharply together as he failed to see what he looked for.

The smile faded from the honest face of his friend as this look was caught and its purport rightly interpreted.

"You've let them slip away!" gratingly muttered the gambler.

"I know where to find them if they are wanted, Jay. Don't break out in that direction

just now. You want this hurt looked after, and a little rest won't do your brain any particular harm. Where's Doc?"

"Sleeping off his drunk, I reckon," came a voice in prompt response. "Anyway he ain't in this crowd!"

"My streak of luck is changing color, then," faintly laughed Jay Dillon, beginning to look and act more like his usual self. "I'll supply the whisky if some good friend will only keep Doc full while my paw is mending itself."

"You don't want to take too many chances, pard," warned Hampton.

"If it was a thousand times worse, I'd not go on the sick-list while this infernal mystery remains unsolved!" almost viciously grated the gambler, freeing his hand and wiping away the blood. "Wrap a rag around it, and let it go at that. Then hunt for sign—search for the trail that cunning demon must have left behind him in carrying away the corpse of Thompson Jones! Five hundred dollars to the man who brings proof sufficient to fit a noose about the neck of Tracy Unwin or the devil who calls himself Pistol Johnny!"

Even apart from their natural desire to get at the bottom of this strange tangle, this reward was enough to set every man in swift motion, trying to solve the mystery.

Dillon himself tried to bind up his crippled hand, but was forced to yield to Hampton, who carefully pushed the splintered bones in place before adjusting the handkerchief.

"I'll do my level best, Jay, but you'd better see Doc as soon as you can. Now that you look and act more like yourself, I'll admit that it's an ugly hurt—infernal ugly! It may cost you a hand unless you are cautious!"

Jay Dillon grated his teeth together with savage energy.

"I'll have one hand left—enough to block the game of that ice-blooded demon. Spare your breath, old fellow, and if you want to do me good, try to get at the bottom of this mystery—find out how and where that corpse has gone to!"

"Then you stick to it, Jay?" slowly asked the other, his brown eyes fixed on the gambler's white face, trying to read what might lie below the surface.

"Every word I uttered was gospel truth. I did find Jones lying in yonder, flat on his back, stone dead. I saw the words I told you, with his bloody finger lying at the last letter! Yet you let the murderer slip through your fingers, while I—thousand curses on the spell that fell over me then, just when I wanted my nerve the most!"

Hoarse, choking, his dry lips flecked with bits of foam, the wounded gambler leaned back against the cabin wall, his eyes glowing redly, his sinewy figure shivering from crown to sole.

Hampton caught the flask which Hod Geary extended, and held the uncorked mouth to those lips. Jay Dillon caught at his hand, drinking with almost savage earnestness until Hampton literally tore his hand away, and with it the flask.

"Not too heavy, pard," he muttered, anxiety filling his honest eyes. "You don't want to get drunk with your hand in that state."

"Nor while the demon who butchered poor old Jones goes unwhipped of justice," the gambler smiled, faintly, but rallying quickly. "Don't you borrow trouble on that score, old fellow. There's not enough liquor in all this country to make me drunk while I've got a contract like this on my hands. If you don't want to take a hand in, get out of the way and let me do what I can!"

Hampton stepped aside, frowning, uneasy. He knew not what to think. These abrupt changes had thoroughly muddled his never too keen wits.

Had Jay Dillon actually witnessed what he swore? If so, where was the corpse? Who had stolen it away, and for what reason? If Jay Dillon had read those fatal words on the floor of the Lone Cabin, traced by the finger of a murdered man, what had altered them so strangely, so ridiculously? And why?

Hardly knowing what he did, Hampton entered the cabin and knelt down, gazing keenly, searchingly at the spidery marks on the rough slab.

The lines were dry, refusing to even blur as he passed a finger heavily across them. And Jay Dillon swore that at noon of that same day, he saw those other words, just where these lines stood. If they had been erased and others substituted, would there not be some signs left behind? Would these letters be so thoroughly dried?

"You doubt my word, I see, even yet," came a low, hard voice, and George Hampton sprang to his feet to face Jay Dillon, pale-faced and stern. "You think I have been trying to swear away the life of an innocent man, in order to gain some secret ends of my own?"

"Devil roast me if I know what to think, Jay!"

"Think what you please, George Hampton," was the cold response, as the gambler turned to leave the cabin.

"I know you wouldn't lie about such a matter, but—"

"But what?" turning upon him with thinly-veiled fierceness.

"Blamed if I know, unless you've been dreaming all this!"

"It's a dream that will end in a hanging, then! Look you, George Hampton," tapping him on the arm with his sound hand. "Help me solve this mystery. Try to find out where they took the body of old Jones. I left it here, and it was gone when I came back. I swear he was dead when I left him. He couldn't have vanished without hands. Find out whose hands did that foul job, and then you'll know just how far I've been dreaming in broad daylight!"

"I'll do what I can, but that won't set the world afire. What few brains I advertise to have, are all gone. Honest, Jay, it wouldn't surprise me much if it turns out that I killed old Jones—or that Pistol Johnny really did swallow him entire!"

Hampton laughed, but it was painfully forced. He was so badly confused that he hardly knew whether he was standing on his head or his feet.

Jay Dillon turned away and left the cabin, casting a keen glance around as he gained the outer air.

The men of Top Notch were scattered here and there, busily searching for aught that could help to solve that puzzling enigma, quite as much to relieve their minds as to win the proffered reward.

Only Pitt Bynight and Hod Geary were near the cabin, seemingly examining the ground, but quick to catch the eye of the gambler, who muttered as he strode past them:

"Keep an eye on me, and follow when I lead the way. I want to ask a few questions where no other ears can catch them."

"All right, boss," growled Geary, turning aside as George Hampton came out of the cabin.

The immediate vicinity of the Lone Cabin was too thoroughly trampled over by the crowd from Top Notch for aught to be found there, and urged on by the words and example of the gambler, the search gradually widened until the hillside was dotted with men.

For a few minutes Jay Dillon kept among them, seemingly the most eager and anxious of them all, but then, as the scope of ground to be covered widened out, he watched his chance and catching the eyes of his two sworn tools, he slipped away from the rest, seemingly following a trail of which he appeared suspicious.

He made a few doubles, until satisfied that his real purpose was not suspected, then passed over to a secure covert where he might lie unseen for at least a few minutes.

His wound pained him keenly, but he only cursed at it and the cool sport to whom he owed it. Just then he had other thoughts that troubled him even more sorely.

Pitt Bynight and Hod Geary followed him after a few seconds, and as they came up, the gambler sharply uttered:

"Who is that fellow? Which one of you knows him best?"

"Pistol Johnny, I reckon you mean, boss?" hesitated Bynight, with a quick, uneasy glance over his shoulder, like one who half-fears to call up an ugly ghost by pronouncing its name.

"I've heard the name, but I never met the critter afore now," Hod Geary ventured, with a savage scowl.

"And you?" nodding at Pitt Bynight.

"I seed him down Tight Squeeze way, the time he kicked up sech a circus with King Philip an' his outfit."

"Then you're the man I want. Hod!"

"Ready, boss!"

"Go back and mix with the gang. Don't talk too much, but manage to let them know that I've got to knock off and hunt Doc. Let it out where Hampton can catch your meaning. He'll think I've gone to pick up a row with those devils, and he'll try to turn the boys back."

"Shell I try to stop 'em, boss?"

"You fool!" with an angry snarl. "I want them to go to town. I want you to go with them, and to put in your best licks, too! Let your tongue out when you get there, only steering clear of that infernal honest Hampton!"

"But shove it into them critters clean up to the hilt, boss!" the stunted Hercules grinned, rubbing his hairy paws as though he already began to taste the sweets of revenge for the stroke that had so effectually painted his blood-shot eyes.

"It won't be such dainty work with the lads heated up as they are now. Plenty of whisky will help along, and you must see that whisky is not wanted. Take that," tossing him a few notes which were eagerly snatched up. "Spend it freely, but don't make too much row while egging the hot-heads on. Do work to count, you sabe?"

"Ef I don't I'm a liar, boss!" chuckled the ruffian, licking his lips hungrily. "I'll set the ball to rollin', an' ef it comes to a stop afore it flattens out both Unwin and Pistol Johnny, I'll never show the face o' me in your company ag'in—so I won't, now!"

"An' us, boss?" ventured Pitt Bynight, a little nervously. "Ef we ain't seed in town—ef

nuther of us ain't in the mux—won't the boys think it kinder strange?"

"Leave that to me," with a frown. "We'll be there in time to take in the circus, never you fret. But first—pull out, Geary! You know what you've got to do. Get down to business!"

The stunted Hercules turned and hastened away.

Jay Dillon, stifling an oath of pain as an incautious motion sent a thrill through his wounded hand, spoke sharply to the swarthy giant:

"Who and what is Pistol Johnny? Straight talk and no extra flourishes, mind you! I want to know his record as far as you can give it."

"You heard o' the circus at Tight Squeeze, two year ago?"

Jay Dillon shook his head shortly.

"I was in the East, then. I was a tenderfoot when I struck Top Notch, a year ago. If I ever heard of that racket, it made no impression on my mind. I'm sure I've never heard of Pistol Johnny before to-day."

The swarthy giant shrugged his shoulders, but hastened to say:

"I wasn't mixed up in the circus, but I was in Tight Squeeze at the time. I heard all about it, an' I seed a part with my own eyes."

"Out with it, then! Boil it down as much as you can. What I want to know is just the sort of chap this cool blade really is: from the record, not through his own talk."

Pitt Bynight grinned faintly as he replied:

"Ax that in Tight Squeeze, an' they'd tell you he was just as good as they make 'em! I didn't locate the p'izen critter, fu'st-off, or durned ef I believe I could 'a' brusted up to him even fer that one little fly! He's bad—mighty bad medicine, now I tell you, boss!"

"Come down to business, Pitt, or you'll find me mighty bitter to take," frowned the gambler.

"He struck Tight Squeeze in a sort o' cyclone-whirl, much as he jumped Top Notch. Tansy Dick was drivin' the hearse, with a full load, when he was held up by the gang—King Philip's babes—an' Pistol Johnny was the fu'st one to block the way, on a white mule. Fu'st-off he seemed as good a road-agent as any in the gang, but he was playin' a double game, an' when the right time comes, he jest called the turn an' bu'sted the bank wide open! Fetched in a deck-load o' stiff's, an' then put up his money that he'd foller 'em with King Philip himself."

"It was the wu'st tangled up business I ever did see—unless this job gits the top seat," with hesitating amendment.

"Go on with your report," was the cold order.

"Afore Pistol Johnny struck camp, the top-sawyer of Tight Squeeze was a woman; Daisy Darling she called herself. She hed pritty nigh all the lay-outs in town under her thumb, an' was willin' to lift the limit to suit everybody that keered to wade in chin-deep! Times was when she rigged out as a man, an' then she was her own twin brother, Dandy. That wasn't all, nuther. She played the part of a thoroughbred sport, sometimes, knowed as Arther Cavendish. An' now let me check 'em off on my fingers, fer fear I'll git wuss tangled up."

"Arthur Cavendish was King Philip, boss o' the gang. Dandy Darling was Daisy Darling. An' the critter we all could 'a' tuck oath was the neatest, gayest, liveliest little woman in seventeen States, was a man!"

"What are you trying to get through you, anyway?" snarled Jay Dillon, frowning angrily as he glared into the swarthy face before him.

"An' the one we knowed as Daisy Darling was all o' these, an' one more to the barg'in," doggedly muttered Pitt Bynight. "That was a man named Abrandt, which Pistol Johnny was huntin' high an' low. He found him, but too late to do what he'd tuck oath. In the row that broke up the gang, a bullet done its work, an' the many-faced critter only lived long enough fer to blow away all the clouds an' show us jest how slick he'd bamboozled us all!"

"And you know nothing more about this fellow?"

"Nothin' sense then, though thar was talk a-plenty 'bout the record he'd made afore he come to Tight Squeeze."

"Well, tough or tender, he'll never get out of Top Notch with comb uncut—put that down for a fixed fact!" gratingly muttered the tall card sharp, his eyes flaming. "He's come here and thinks to play much the same game you have outlined. He's got the first trick—for just as surely as I know that old Jones is dead, just so certain am I that this cool demon must have had a finger in the disappearance of his body! But how? When did he do it? What for?"

Pitt Bynight stole a furtive glance into that white, hard-lined face, dropping his eyes as they caught that fiery gaze. He shifted uneasily on his grassy seat, but spoke like one afraid to maintain silence, even as he feared to speak out:

"I run up ag'in'st the critter down in camp, this mornin', not more then a hour by sun. I

*If the present reader wishes to have more light on this peculiar combination, he or she is respectfully referred to DIME LIBRARY No. 286, "Pistol Johnny."

see him ag'in, more'n once durin' the forenoon. I didn't recognize him then, but it come back to me when we was tryin' to run the foreman up a tree."

"What do you mean by that?" hissed Jay Dillon, his sound hand mechanically feeling for a weapon, forgetful that they were still in the possession of George Hampton.

Pitt Bynight shrunk back, ready to leap to his feet in case of need, his swarthy face turning a sickly yellow, but his voice comparatively steady as he responded:

"I wouldn't say it to anybody else, boss, but I've got to tell *you* the truth. I *did* see him thar, an' so did plenty o' others."

"Once more, what do you mean?" with sudden coldness that sent a shiver through the frame of the black-bearded giant.

"That I wouldn't try to prove Pistol Johnny snatched this body, ef I was in your place, boss. Red-hot pinchers can't git it out o' my mouth, but mebbe they's others in camp that wouldn't hold so tight a grip ef it come to a up-an'-down matter o' time."

"If he didn't spirit away the corpse, who could have done it?"

"I ain't sayin', boss," with more ease, as though he felt the worst peril was past. "But I do say that he couldn't 'a' done the trick any time atween now an' noon, nur any time sense afore sun-up to-day."

Jay Dillon sat in silence, gnawing at the nails of his left hand, a sullen fire glowing in his jetty orbs. This was a new complication in what he thought was a thoroughly digested scheme. If Pitt Bynight spoke the truth, and he would not dare lie to his face, he dared not press that charge against Pistol Johnny. In falling flat, it would still more deeply entangle him; and even now he began to doubt whether he could ever fully retrieve himself.

What should be his first step? Where should he strike to recover the ground he had lost through all these unlooked for complications?

Something must be done, and that at once. For not only—

With a vicious curse he sprung to his feet, his eyes glowing, and his face transfigured as he recalled the words spoken by Tracy Unwin while explaining the sole grounds which the two miners could have for charging him with threatening Thompson Jones.

"We've got to get down to solid work, and that without the loss of another minute!" he grated, viciously. "You know the boys as well as I do, Pitt. Get down to camp and find one; bid him to take the best horse he can find, and get ready for a tail-on-end ride to Gold Hills. Stop!" as the swarthy giant turned to dash away in hasty obedience. "Tell him to keep an eye open on the trail for us, and do you hurry back to meet me with paper and an envelope. Get them in my room."

"Shell I find you here, boss?" hesitated the giant.

"I'll be on my way back to camp by the trail we came. Tell him which way to take if he gets ready before I can send you back there. I've got to play cautious, or I'd be at camp as soon as your legs could carry you there. Off with you—and make no mistakes this time. There's far too many scored against us already!"

Away dashed the swarthy giant, and Jay Dillon followed after him at a slower pace. He cast furtive glances about him as he came in sight of the Lone Cabin, but drew a freer breath as he failed to see any one of the citizens lingering near.

"Hod has played his part to perfection thus far," he muttered, a ray of reviving hopes springing into his haggard face. "If he does as well to the end! If he can only stir the animals up until they make a blind rush for those two devils! *If he only can!*"

Strong through the restraint Jay Dillon put upon himself, he was comparatively near town when Pitt Bynight met him, with writing materials in his hand and a grim triumph in his evil countenance.

"Hod's gittin' thar, boss!" he grinned, viciously. "The boys is fillin' up on bug-juice, an' Hod keeps stirrin' 'em up from under kiver."

"Tell your man to carry this to Gold Hills, or further, if he don't find Steel-face there. It's life or death, tell him, and I'll fill his boot with gold if he gets there in time for my work!"

CHAPTER X.

STEEL-FACE PLAYS THE PATERNAL.

LEE FACER lifted his head from his pillow and cast a glance toward the door of his room, stifling a yawn as he responded to the rat-tat-tat of sturdy knuckles on the further side of the barrier.

"Don't want the sheet for breakfast, do you? Confound you! let up! Give a man time to put one sock on, won't you?"

"Don't shoot—it's only me, square!" came the panting, slightly shaky tones of fat Ebenezer Flick.

"Then I won't waste a cartridge. Skin out, me. If I've snoozed a bit too long, give Tausy Dick a horn, and ask him to bust some part of his rigging long enough for me to catch up, will you?"

"It ain't that—it's the young gent as come in

with the Overland an' you an' the lady. He ain't in thar with you?"

With something suspiciously like an oath, Steel-face leaped from bed to the door, turning the key and flinging wide the barrier, regardless of his own rather abbreviated costume just at that moment.

"What's up? What are you trying to get through you, anyway, 'Nezer Flick?" he cried sternly, one cool hand under the fat, double-chin of his host, pushing his florid face back for a square look.

"It's the gal—lady, you know!" spluttered the landlord, recoiling a step. "She's got kinder hystericky 'long o' not bein' able fer to find anythin' of her brother. Nur his bed ain't bin slept in. Nur nobody hain't see'd him this mornin' nur nothin'. An' I come up here to see ef you knowed whar you left him last night. Or ef he wasn't in 'long o' you, sleepin' off—eh?"

That cold hand dropped far enough to close about his fat neck, and Steel-face gave him a shake that cut short his flood of words.

"What are you talking about, man?" he grated, his eyes glowing vividly, his voice hard and menacing. "Who is it you can't find? And why did you expect to find him in *my* room?"

"Howard Carter. Gone. Sister kickin' up a row, an'—"

"Didn't he come in last night?" sharply interrupted Steel-face, relaxing his grip and stepping back into the room, hurriedly catching up his clothes and beginning to dress.

"Mebbe he's come sense—go see!" spluttered Ebenezer Flick, waddling away at a more rapid gait than he had shown for many a day.

Never remarkable for his courage, the landlord seemed to hold this ice-blooded gambler in superstitious awe. In the presence of Steel-face he was never wholly at ease. And just now, there was a look in the gray eyes that almost curdled his blood.

Not until he reached the flight of stairs, nearly tumbling down them headlong in his fright, did Ebenezer Flick dare draw a breath, his mountain of fat quivering like a mold of jelly as it anticipated a flying bullet from the gambler's room.

Mabel Carter met him at the foot of the flight, pale-faced, anxious-eyed, her voice far from steady as she caught his arm:

"Where is he? What have you found out? Why don't he come?"

"Said he would as soon's he got his—got dressed, mum!" gasped Flick, rolling his pop-eyes over his shoulder, ready to jump or duck in case his dread should turn to reality.

"Then you found my brother there?" with a breath of intense relief. "He changed his room and never notified you? My foolish fears were without foundation! Which room? Never mind—I'll find it!"

Slipping past the rotund figure, Mabel Carter ran lightly up the steep, narrow flight. Ebenezer stared after her with open mouth as round as his wild eyes. Then, as he realized her purpose, as he divined how utterly she had mistaken the meaning of his words, a gasping groan rose in his throat and he turned to seek safety in flight, gasping:

"Now I will ketch it! Ef she jumps in on him—*durn* the crooked luck, *anyway!*"

But Steel-face, just slipping into his coat, crossed the threshold of his chamber as Mabel Carter recoiled with a low cry of disappointment. Until that instant she believed that the landlord had just come from her brother, who had, through some error or caprice, occupied a room for the night different from the one adjoining hers, which he had shown her the evening before.

"You—my brother—"

"Calm yourself, Miss Carter," said Lee Facer, grasping her trembling hands between both of his, a strangely mellow sound to his words. "There is some little mistake, but I don't believe anything serious could have happened to your brother."

"He is not here—his bed has not been occupied—the landlord says he never came back last night, after he went away with—"

"With me, you mean?" softly uttered Steel-face, completing the sentence which the poor girl's failing breath and rising fears left incomplete.

Mabel tore her hands free, starting back a pace, her glorious eyes flashing as they fixed upon his face as though to read all that lay below the polished surface.

"With you? Where did you leave him? What happened him that he never returned? I demand my brother at your hands, sir!"

Steel-face bowed, gravely, then responded in cold, even tones:

"I accept the responsibility, Miss Carter. I will restore your brother to you, if he is on the face of the earth."

A low, startled cry escaped the maiden's lips at that grave speech. Uneasy, annoyed, even alarmed she had been when nothing could be learned of the missing guest; but that was hardly because she feared evil had befallen him, personally speaking. It was rather because she feared losing the stage, which was already drawn up in front of the hotel. Because this annoying

mishap would delay their arrival at Top Notch for one day if not two.

But now—a sudden, chilling fear seized upon her heart as Lee Facer spoke so gravely, so earnestly. Not the words themselves, but his tones and demeanor led her to expect far worse than a mere delay in completing their long and arduous journey.

"You do not think—surely nothing serious has happened him?"

"I trust not—I even believe not," was the softened response, as Steel-face again secured her hand, drawing it across his arm and leading the way to the stairs. "I feel sure that all will be cleared up in a very few minutes from now. Young men will have their little fling, you understand, Miss Carter, and—"

"What do you mean, sir?" almost indignantly ejaculated Mabel.

She tried to free her hand, but Lee Facer held it firmly, seemingly without a conscious effort, and his voice grew softer, more soothing as he spoke again, at the head of the flight:

"If anything has really happened, you would be the very last to pardon me for concealing aught, Miss Carter. It may be rather hard on me, a stranger to you both, but I can bear your mistaken suspicions for a time, knowing that you will in the end give me credit for what I may deserve. You kissed your brother good-night, Miss Carter?"

"I did—what do you mean?" stammered the bewildered girl, so abruptly came this question.

"Then you surely noticed that he had been drinking?"

Softly, gravely, with seeming reluctance came these words, and Lee Facer averted his eyes as though unwilling to note the effect of his question. Even as she felt that shock, so Mabel Carter felt this gentle consideration on the part of a stranger.

She shivered, but made no reply. She had noticed the fumes of liquor on the lips of her brother, but she had made no mention of it then, feeling secure in her trust. Howard was no drunkard, no roisterer. He would drink no more. What he had taken was for a cramp, or to drive away a headache, or—and in the heavy sleep or weariness she had forgotten all about it until these words recalled the fact.

Slowly, gently Steel-face assisted her down the stairs, his voice and manner growing more paternal as he spoke again:

"It will all come out right, dear child. I will find Howard, and bring him to you, safe and sound. When he comes, let him see a bright and cheerful face. Men are very touchy at times, and—"

"Bring him back to me, and I'll never say a word—never let him even suspect what misery fills my poor heart!" brokenly murmured the half-stupefied maiden as they reached the foot of the stairs, turning toward the "parlor," through the door of which Ebenezer Flick dodged, thanking his stars that nothing so very awful had happened, after all.

Into the room Lee Facer conducted the poor girl whom he was so cruelly trying. He gave her a seat, standing before her as he spoke in low, grave tones.

"I did go out with your brother after supper, last night. He said he wanted to take a look at the town. I warned him that it was a rough place, but he laughed, and said he could take care of himself if any row broke out."

"He is so brave—so reckless!" sobbed Mabel, her face hidden in her trembling hands.

A faint smile swept swiftly across the hard face of the cunning schemer, but there was nothing of levity in his voice as he added:

"It sounds hard to say in your presence, dear child, but could I, a stranger to him, do more than hint that he was taking more liquor than was good for him? I could *only* hint. I had no right to drag him away from the vile poison. He would have considered it an insult if I had made such an effort. Surely *you* see this, dear child?"

"You left him? You left him to—to—"

"I stayed with him until I could remain no longer. I had an important engagement which I missed through my solicitude for your brother, Miss Carter," almost stiffly replied the schemer, injured innocence personified. "Still, I did not leave him until I secured his promise to return to this hotel at once. Until the landlord roused me up a few minutes ago, I never dreamed of such a thing as his remain'g out all night."

He started back a pace as Mabel Carter sprung to her feet, her face pale as death, but resolute, her tear-wet eyes glowing resolutely, her voice clear and firm:

"Tell me where you left him, and I will go find my brother. God help me! I have no one to send!"

Steel-face stamped his foot sharply, and called aloud the name of the landlord. A moment later Ebenezer Flick came waddling in, agitated, his pendulous lips quivering, a frightened light in his pop-eyes.

"Flick, send your wife to look after this lady, and then get ready to bear me company in search of her brother. Lively, now."

The host skurried away, and Steel-face turned again to Mabel:

"Look in my face, Miss Carter. Is it the face

of a villain? Is it a face you could trust, for lack of better? Will you let me take your place in this search? I will find your brother and bring him back to you safe and sound—or bitterly avenge him and you."

Lee Facer seemed peculiarly unfortunate in his selection of words that morning, which was rather to be wondered at, for he very seldom made mistakes of this sort. But as Mabel Carter shrunk back with a low sob and shiver, her face blanching to deathly whiteness, a momentary glitter shot into his gray eyes.

"You must accept my poor services, dear child," he murmured, catching her sinking frame and lowering her into the seat she had just abandoned. "You are too badly shaken to do aught else—and it is work for a strong-nerved man. Try to compose yourself. Try to believe that nothing serious has happened. If there had been any row—"

The sentence was not finished. Steel-face was not a man to waste his breath, and further speech just now would be wasted. Mabel Carter had fainted.

A few moments later Mrs. Flick, tall, lean, energetic, but kindly as it is barely possible for a woman in her responsible position to be, came into the room, and took charge of the poor girl, snappishly bidding Lee Facer take himself off; no favorite of hers, this icy sport!

Steel-face did so without delay, and with him went Ebenezer Flick, though far from voluntarily.

Steel-face strode to the door of the hotel, and curtly told the weather-beaten driver of the stage that he need wait no longer for him or the Carters; circumstances held them over a trip at Gold Hills.

Back into the office, where Ebenezer Flick was preparing for the search.

"You remember the hour when I came in, of course?" he uttered, in clear, precise tones. "I mentioned it, I believe, because I expected to find a friend here to keep an important appointment."

"Nigh ten, wasn't it?"

"Seven minutes past, as I told you at the time. It was four minutes past ten when I left young Carter at Dimple Dick's shebang. I am positive of this, because I was surprised at its being so much later than I thought. My appointment was for ten o'clock, you remember."

Ebenezer Flick nodded vigorous assent. Even if he did not recall the fact, he was not going to dispute this disagreeable customer of his.

"We smoked one cigar together, then I went to my room, before eleven, knowing that my man would hardly come in so far behind time. Of course he didn't, or you would have called me."

"Never see hide nor hair of him!"

"Nor of young Carter? I know he never came in before I went to bed, but I fell asleep at once and never opened my eyes until you came to rouse me, for the stage as I then supposed."

"He never come in a-tall, don't you know?" spluttered Flick, clapping a hat on his bald head and coming out from behind the bar.

"Then we'll look in at Dimple Dick's shebang the first thing," as he led the way out doors. "We may possibly find him there still, for, between you and me, Flick, the young blood was drinking like a fish when I had to leave him!"

They found one drunken man in the saloon, rolled over in one corner, but it wasn't Howard Carter. Carl Megilp, having carried out his part of the bold game, combined pleasure with business, ceasing to swallow whisky only when he dropped insensible to the floor.

The barkeeper told them this, and they could see for themselves that the rough customer was too drunk to be awakened by anything save the lapse of time. As for Howard Carter, the attendant could only say he had left the saloon shortly after Mr. Facer took his departure. He was just "a little shot," but by no means what the speaker could call drunk. Paid his bill like a gentleman, and went away about his business.

And there the trail seemed to end, though the two men searched through the little town, asking questions and arousing curiosity on every hand. Giving a clear description of the missing man, Steel-face promised a liberal reward to any who could bring definite information concerning him. And then the two men returned to the hotel.

Mabel Carter met them at the door, pale but looking stronger and more composed than might have been expected. One white hand flew to her heart as Lee Facer slowly shook his head.

"We have brought no positive tidings, my dear child," he said in grave, gentle tones that made Ebenezer Flick open wide his eyes and involuntarily glance at the back of the sport, as though expecting to see the black broadcloth split open on each shoulder blade to permit the sudden expansion of a pair of wings. "But you know that no news is proverbially good news. If anything serious had happened, we would have heard of it at once."

Lame though this consolation was, it helped strengthen the poor girl, and she made no resistance when Steel-face begged for a brief interview with her in the sitting-room. A word

to the landlord insured them against interruption, and placing a chair for his victim, Steel-face gently detailed what had been done thus far.

"If he is in town, word will be brought to us very soon," he added.

"He is not—he will never come back!" sobbed Mabel, then lifting her head and dashing away the hot tears that almost scalded her poor eyes, she cried: "I have some money—I can get more—spend it like water to solve the fate of my poor darling!"

"I have already offered a reward for information, my dear child," was the soothing response. "I will myself join in the search, and know no rest until the mystery is solved—until your brother is restored to your arms in safety. I would be at work now, only—do you know of any bitter enemies your brother could have in this part of the country—or who could possibly have traced him to this place? Think closely I beg of you, dear child! It may be of the utmost importance. If you could only give us the slightest clew on which to construct a theory!"

"I know of no enemies Howard could have made. I know of nothing he has done or said that could raise a hand in anger against him!"

Steel-face frowned a trifle, but it vanished as quickly as it came.

"He was talking with that fellow—with Carl Megilp—about a man named Anson Carter, who—"

"Our father," murmured Mabel, her eyes drooping, a flush flitting into her cheeks for an instant. "It is a painful subject, and—"

"Too painful to be brought up in hopes of serving your brother?" gently, almost reproachfully murmured Lee Facer.

"If I thought that—"

"It may have nothing whatever to do with his strange disappearance, and then again right there may be hidden the very clew we are searching for," quickly interjected the cunning schemer. "Still, if you are not willing to speak, it is not for me to insist. I will work on in hopes of succeeding without that."

"I will tell you all, briefly," murmured Mabel, after a searching gaze into those gray eyes, now so kindly, so paternal, so full of tender sympathy such as a father might feel for the grief of a loved daughter.

"Our parents separated, when we were but infants, you might say. Father went away, and we never saw him from that day to this. Then—mother died, and on her death-bed she begged us to seek out our father, bearing him her forgiveness and dying kiss."

"You knew where your father was, then?" ventured Steel-face, as her voice faltered, breaking down in a choking sob.

"Not then—not for a long time. Not until a letter came to us from a—a friend, who had volunteered to join in our quest."

"And then you hastened at once to this part of the country. Your brother mentioned something about the matter, remember," with a faint smile as Mabel started, staring half-affrightedly at him. "You expected to join your father and your friend at Top Notch?"

"Take me to them!" impulsively cried the poor girl, wringing her hands, tears streaming down her face. "Take me there, and let me tell them what has happened! He will find poor brother, if mortal man can!"

"Your father, you mean?" and there was a half-mocking gleam in those gray eyes.

"My father, and—Tracy Unwin," with sudden braveness, meeting his gaze squarely, a slight color tinged her pale cheeks. "You are a friend; you are doing all you can to restore my poor brother to my arms; why should I not trust you?"

"There is no good reason why you should not, dear child," gravely, gently murmured the arch-hypocrite, pressing the hand he took between his palms. "You love this Tracy Unwin. I am glad of that. He is a fine fellow, and—"

"You know him?" eagerly gasped the startled girl.

"I know him by sight and reputation; the one is goodly, and the other is good," with a genial smile.

"Take me to them, then! At once—even if we have to go on foot! It will kill me to wait until another stage! Two whole days!"

"Wait, my child," gently but firmly restraining the half-crazed maiden as he spoke on. "You could not stand such a trip, even on horseback. And if you could, would it be wise? Would it be sisterly? To hasten away from here, not knowing what has befallen your brother? Not knowing but that he may be brought here, needing your tender care?"

With a painful sob Mabel sunk back in her chair, shivering from crown to sole with terribly conflicting emotions.

"Guide me—tell me what to do!" she murmured, brokenly, adding with sudden vehemence: "I must do something! I must do something to keep my heart from bursting!"

"You shall do something, and that of importance," was the soothing response. "You can do something that none of the rest of us here can do. Go to your room and write a letter to Tracy Unwin—to your father, too, if you see fit. Tell

them what has happened, and beg them to lose no time in riding to meet you here. And by the time they arrive, I hope we will have your brother here to meet them, safe and sound!"

"I will—I will do this so gladly!" brightening up after a most wonderful manner, grasping his hands and pressing a burning kiss upon them. "You can send them? I cannot spare you—for Howard's sake!"

Lee Facer smiled blandly and as they rose to their feet, he bent and pressed a traitor's kiss on her pure forehead.

"I know a man who will catch and pass the stage before it gets half-way to Top Notch. Prepare your letters, and I'll have him in waiting on a good horse by the time you come down with them. Go, now, little girl," with a gentle pressure of her hand as he spoke. "Every moment is doubly precious, remember!"

Mabel flew up to her chamber where her traveling-bag was deposited, never once doubting that satanically cool schemer. And Steel-face passed on to the office, where he wrote a few lines to a person whom he addressed as Jay Dillon.

Half an hour later he had a man at the door, mounted on a good horse, ready for the road. And with the eager eyes of his unsuspecting victim watching his movements, Steel-face palmed her notes, substituting his own for them, then bade the man ride with a bloody spur until he had delivered his commission!

The remainder of that day saw little rest for Steel-face, who seemed terribly in earnest as he started men out in every direction to look for the missing man. He himself searched every house in the camp, then went out to the hills and urged the men on to renewed exertions.

He seemed literally tireless, several times returning to the hotel expressly to cheer up the anxious sister, each time urging her to renewed hope.

"We must find him sooner or later," he would say, with that peculiar cheering smile. "And when he does come back, he must not find an invalid to greet him. Brace up, as the boys say, little girl! Think how it might shock the poor fellow to see your wan cheeks and tear-dimmed eyes! Think—think of Tracy Unwin, and his coming, too!"

Then—Steel-face came in with a dusty fellow, who seemed wayworn and weary from long travel. He had a strange story to tell, that seemed to throw a gleam of light on the mysterious vanishment.

He had met a young, richly dressed young man, fully answering the description of Howard Carter, riding in company with two other men, on horseback, along the regular stage road to Silver City. The young man did not seem to be an unwilling traveler; he certainly was both hand and foot free. He was laughing lightly when they passed by the spot where he, the speaker, had stopped in the shade to rest himself a bit.

Steel-face questioned the fellow closely, but this was the sum and substance of his story. He had no reason to ask any questions, even if the travelers had not passed him by so rapidly. He never thought of noting their faces, and only remembered the young man from his dress; it was not a common thing to see a silk hat in that wild region.

If this story relieved the worst fears of Mabel Carter, it left her still more thoroughly bewildered. Why had Howard deserted her? What cause had he for riding back to the town they had so recently left? Why, if he had to go, did he not first tell her his reasons?

After dismissing the prospector who brought this tidings, Steel-face returned to the puzzled maiden, his face grave and hard-set. He smiled faintly as she gave him a startled look, but there was a hidden anxiety in his tones that she noted—just as he meant she should.

"The fellow didn't like to say quite all he noticed, in your presence, dear child," he said, gravely, a slight frown wrinkling his brows. "He told me, and I deemed it no more than right that you should know all. He said that Howard seemed to be very drunk."

Mabel covered her face, shivering visibly, but said nothing.

"I will send a good man along the trail, and see what he can find out at Silver City. As for you, poor child!" tenderly stroking her silken hair. "You must have patience and hope for the best."

When night descended over the little mining-town, Steel-face once more sought out Mabel Carter, persuading her to go to her chamber. He would awaken her at the first tidings, be those good or bad. And trusting all to this treacherous demon, the maiden obeyed, little dreaming what a terrible awakening that was fated to be!

CHAPTER XI.

A LIFE FOR A SHOT.

"AND that's the breed o' cats you men of Top Notch bend the knee before and hail as mighty nobles, is it?" with a low laugh and backward toss of his shapely head. "A holy howler right from Yelptown! A blubbery lubber turning faint and stomach-sick at the sight of a drop of

his own blood! And this is the base counterfeit you men of Top Notch place on a pedestal and worship as doubly refined gold! Pardner, I'm more than ashamed of you! I'm disgusted, for the world is hollow and my doll is ram-jammed chock-full o' sawdust! And this is the 'way-up camp where I was to find music layin' round in whole sheets and counterpanes! Fun in chunks so big that Pike's Peak wouldn't make more show alongside than a toy boat in competition with the Great Eastern! Where I'd save money by crawling into a coffin before I ventured to send forth my feeble peep and call it a crow!

"Gaze on that picture, then take a sober squint at this!"

There was no reply. Tracy Unwin walked on by the side of the little sport who had so unexpectedly appeared as his champion. He was confused, stunned, bewildered.

Behind them he could distinguish the half-crazed words of Jay Dillon, as the tall card sharp bewailed the loss of his good right hand. Could hear him now cursing, now fiercely demanding vengeance on them both. Yet he walked mechanically on by the side of Pistol Johnny, never once turning their heads to glance backward.

"A regiment of roughs, toughs and hard citizens, any one of them big a-plenty to pick me up and swallow me at a gulp, without even taking the trouble to pin back my ears or pull off my boots before making a bolt of it! Every man jack of them with a firearms factory slung at each hip! Each critter with *b-a-d* citizen written in letters a foot high on each individual mansard roof! And here we meander as innocent as lambs and twice as harmless, with our backs to the foe—and not one of the gang dare try a pot-shot for meat!"

"Pardner, this ain't livin'. It ain't even stayin' here. Show me a meek an' humble tree that won't shed all its bark with shame at making the acquaintance of such an ass, and I'll leave this world if I have to do my climbing feet foremost! So I will!"

A short, hard laugh broke from the lips of his companion.

"Stand by me a little longer, and they'll spare you the trouble of climbing!"

Pistol Johnny turned short and grasped the cold hand of the foreman between his own, shaking it vigorously, smiling all over his face.

"I'm the worst old standby you ever run up against, pardner, and the less show there is the tighter I stick. But I was beginning to weaken just a shadow, before you set my awful fears at rest by chirping out that cheerful prediction—for two dumb men in a crowd of a couple makes me feel mighty sick! With you to talk and me to do the acting, I reckon we can run Top Notch into the ground—and set on the nest long enough to hatch out a wee bit of common sense and uncommon justice. Eh?"

There was no reply. Tracy Unwin was glancing over his shoulder, but there was nothing of importance for him to see just then. An abrupt turn in the trail shut out all sight of the Lone Cabin and the buzzing crowd gathered before it.

"Never you borrow trouble on that score, pardner," chuckled Pistol Johnny, dropping the unresponsive hand with a slight shrug of his trim shoulders. "It'll be a good hour before those fellows think to ask themselves just why they forgot to string us up to dry in the sunshine. And by that time you and I will have another trick or two in readiness to spread before their bewildered peepers."

With a start Tracy Unwin turned to gaze into that cheerful face, his own beginning to lose something of that half-frozen look which had come upon it when that terrible charge was hurled in his teeth.

"You saved my life, and—"

"Got you a reprieve, rather," was the swift amendment, sudden gravity chasing away that reckless smile. "Come! Let's get back to town, where we can talk matters over and arrange for the after-clap. There's bound to be one, in the nature of things."

"You don't believe I killed him?" almost savagely demanded Tracy, grasping the Cool Hand by an arm, gazing into his face.

"I know you didn't," was the positive response.

A low, almost choking cry, came gaspingly to the lips of the young foreman, and his eyes were all aglow as he uttered:

"You know it? You know he is still alive?"

"Morally certain, put it, pardner," with increased gravity, as he slipped an arm through that of the sorely shaken youth, moving on toward Top Notch.

"Then you don't know? You are not positive Thompson Jones lives?"

"Well, I couldn't just take oath to that effect, but I wouldn't mind giving a pretty strong affirmation that way. You see, pardner, there's nothing so uncertain as a dead-sure thing! Now we're here, and the next moment we're gone. Thompson Jones might be alive and well at the instant I opened my lips to say so, but he might be cold meat before the words had time to warm the tip of my tongue. See? And that being a fixed fact, why, I can't just take an oath to what you want. It's a risk, and I'm a man constitu-

tionally opposed to taking risk. I don't think they're healthy, and—brace up, lad," with sudden earnestness filling voice and eyes.

"Can't you see that I'm just talking to rouse you? To brush the cobwebs from your brain? You've got to brace up, man," with a swift emphasis, as he hurried on more rapidly. "If we're to get your feet out of the snares in time to save your neck there's got to be some tall reasoning done and countermines prepared. Try to clear your brain as we mosey, and when we get to camp we'll see what can be done."

Not another word did Pistol Johnny utter along the way. Not until they entered Top Notch, and, successfully running the gantlet of the few remaining citizens, were seated in a snug little room with closed and barred doors, did he again touch upon the matter of Thompson Jones and the mystery which enveloped his fate.

"First and foremost, pardner, let me beg your pardon for chipping in without first asking if you needed any help from the outside."

Cooler, more composed than he had been since that black charge was first brought against him, Tracy Unwin grasped the small, muscular hand and pressed it gratefully.

"Only for you, that cold-blooded demon would now be chuckling over my dead body! I thank you—some day I may be able to prove to you how deeply, how earnestly. Just now—I dare not say all I feel!"

Pistol Johnny laughed softly, a genial light filling his gray eyes.

"Consider all said and the books balanced, pardner. After all, you don't owe me so awful much."

"Only my life—my honor!"

"Because it was more to have a little sport with Jay Dillon and his heelers, than through any particular love for you," bluntly added the Cool Hand. "I never saw your face before that instant, to my knowledge. I didn't even know your name. But when I saw two tough cases bounce a man at the beck of that crook, I just shut my eyes and took a header on pure faith that I couldn't be very wide off."

Tracy Unwin gazed into that smiling countenance, trying to read the enigma which had puzzled more than one that day. Why had this stranger risked so much in his behalf? What did he know about this sickening mystery? Surely—

"You know—you must know—"

"I'm mighty glad you take that view of the matter, pardner," was the swift interjection, as the Cool Hand laughed gleefully. "The more I know the better my chances for calling the turn on Jay Dillon when he comes at us with a fresh combination. I didn't like to seem too fresh, but now you've volunteered—fill me chuck full with what you know about this Thompson Jones and all the rest."

"I thought—"

"That I held a sure hand, instead of bluffing those fellows on a bobtail!" laughed the little sport, his gray eyes twinkling anew. "My dear fellow, you've got an awful lot to learn before you can get your diploma from Brazen Face or Nimble Tongue! Don't take the trouble to think. It costs time, and may cost eternity, too! Let me do the thinking, while you try your hand at talking. Tell me all you know or suspect about Thompson Jones and his affairs. For if it hadn't been for him and them, you wouldn't have got into all this muddle."

"Then you don't know whether he is dead or still living?" persisted the foreman.

"Which would you prefer to be the case?"

"Can you ask that question?" almost in anger.

"I thought I did," with a dry laugh. "Still, I'll do it some more. Do you really wish to hear that Thompson Jones is dead?"

"Heaven forbid!"

"That settles it, then! Thompson Jones is alive. Now cut loose!"

Positive enough the words, but there was something in the face and voice of the little sport that told Tracy Unwin this assurance came only from those blonde-shaded lips. A frown contracted his brows, and there was a harsh suspicion in his voice as he exclaimed:

"You are lying to me! You don't mean all you say! What is your object in playing a game like this?"

A cold, hard expression came into those keen gray eyes as Pistol Johnny bent forward and lightly tapped the foreman with a finger-tip.

"If I throw up the job, how many backers will you have in this little game, Tracy Unwin? Who do you think will stand between you and the noose which Jay Dillon is fitting for your neck?"

"I'll die fighting!"

"The bigger fool you for talking of dying at all, when there's a fair show open for turning the tables on that rascal and his tools. The bigger fool you for trying to kick the platform from under your feet before you fling off the noose."

"But I can't understand—"

"You can understand that it is your neck in danger of pulling hemp, can't you? You can understand that only for my interference you would already be on the further side of the range? What more do you ask to know before you can bring yourself to trust me?"

Subdued, ashamed, Tracy Unwin drooped his eyes.

"I was a fool. Tell me what you please, and I'll try to rest content until I can learn more."

"You do the telling. Who is this Thompson Jones? You said something back yonder about his past life. I was watching the face of Jay Dillon as you spoke, and I know that right there is a weak spot in his armor. What is it? Crack or flaw in the casting?"

Tracy Unwin hesitated, but it was only long enough to take one keen glance into those honest gray eyes. Then he spoke:

"Thompson Jones is really named Anson Carter. Years ago, he had a serious quarrel with his wife, back in their Eastern home, and abandoned her with their two small children."

"No divorce, or anything of that sort?"

"I think not—I am almost positive not. I know that Mrs. Carter made no attempt to secure one, and I can say the same of her husband, to the best of my knowledge."

"All right. Don't let me throw you off the straight track."

"I don't know which one was most to blame for that quarrel. Possibly there were faults on the part of each. I know that Mrs. Carter was very proud and high-spirited."

"A bit of a virago, eh?" with a cynical smile.

"The quarrel rose over money matters, I believe. Anson Carter failed in business for a large sum, and to square everything with his creditors, stripped him of every dollar. It even took a large portion of his wife's private fortune. She gave this of her own accord, I understand, for the honor of the name she bore; but when all was settled with them, she bitterly reproached Anson Carter with his mistakes. She admitted to me years afterward that she used a much harsher term."

"They will do it, dear, delicious cats!" murmured Pistol Johnny, one hand tugging at his blonde mustache. "Made it hot for the poor devil, of course!"

"One word led to another, until Anson Carter vowed she should never see his face or hear his voice again until he could return with a sum equal to the fortune he had lost. He went away and kept his oath. From that hour up to the day of her death, Mrs. Carter never saw him, never received a word from him. For all she could learn, he might have gone to his grave when he rushed out of her presence that bitter day!"

"Instead, he came West to grow up with the country. He changed his name to that of Thompson Jones. He scratched around until he hit a good prospect, calling it his Last Hope, and after many days began to dream of returning in triumph to his haughty spouse. That's about the figure, isn't it, pardner?"

Tracy Unwin nodded, closely watching the face of his strangely made friend, wondering how much more those red lips could tell, if their owner only felt inclined.

"Stick a peg and hitch thread number one around it until wanted," nodded the Cool Hand. "Now for your part in this little domestic drama. When did you step on the stage? And the kids—begging pardon of what one of them has become in all these years, you understand, pardner. I think you murmured something about love and sweet breezes back by the Lone Cabin? Or was it only a dream of my own?"

A slight flush swept across the face of the foreman at this half-mocking speech, but his tones were steady as he spoke again:

"When I was but little more than a child, I became acquainted with Mrs. Carter and her two children. And as I grew older, those ties seemed to grow stronger. Then—I asked Mabel Carter to marry me."

"Which she agreed to do, if you would fetch back her long-lost father. You set sail, and kind Providence aided your quest. You found Thompson Jones, and in finding him, discovered Anson Carter. Eh?"

Tracy Unwin nodded assent.

"I was in doubt for a long time, and seeing what a peculiar disposition he had, I dared not openly seek to solve my doubts. Not until a week ago did I discover the truth, beyond a doubt. Then, as they had begged me to do in the last letter I received from home, I wrote, telling them where their father was."

"And the old lady—beg pardon; for the instant I forgot you alluded to her death. The children said they were coming?"

"I haven't heard from them as yet, but I gave them plain directions where to come, and who to ask for on their arrival, should I not be warned in time to meet them at Gold Hills."

"It was a fool trick—not your writing to them, but your letting Jay Dillon know of it!" muttered Pistol Johnny, frowning darkly, a troubled light filling his gray eyes.

"What do you mean by that? What has he got to do with them?" demanded Tracy Unwin, turning paler, leaning forward in deep anxiety.

"The rascal is playing a bold game, with the Last Hope as stakes. He tried to put the owner out of the way, and—now you've let him suspect the coming of the heirs. Do you reckon a

man like him will permit them to reach here in safety?"

Tracy Unwin sprang to his feet with a choking cry of mingled rage and apprehension, crying out:

"I'll go to meet and guard them on the way! Quick—"

Pistol Johnny caught his arm with one hand, clapping a palm over his lips as he muttered sharply:

"Listen! That may not be so easy, pardner! Do you hear that sweet chorus rising on the evening air? Do you know what that portends?"

A low, ominous sound came through the closed door. A growing muttering that told of a storm more dangerous, more awe-inspiring than was ever brewed elsewhere than in human breasts.

"Jay Dillon is trying a new purchase, I reckon, pardner," added Pistol Johnny, taking a quick look at his weapons as he moved toward the door, at the same time adding: "You stay here, Unwin. Try to cool your hot blood a bit. Try to bear in mind that unless you can get out of this storm with a sound neck and unimpaired breath, your sweetheart stands a mighty poor show of escaping the claws of that card sharp. Put your trust in me, and I'll pull you safely through the breakers."

Stunned, confused, bewildered, Tracy Unwin sunk back in his seat, and unlocking the door, Pistol Johnny slipped outside, pausing for an instant to locate the tumult, now too distinct for him to mistake its real meaning.

"It's coming, hot and heavy, sure enough!" he muttered, stepping toward the confused yet unmistakable sounds. "That crippled serpent will make us feel his fangs even yet, unless we play right smart."

No one who saw him then would have dreamed that the yells for blood were being raised quite as much on his account as for the young man accused of murdering Thompson Jones. There was a cold, mocking smile playing about his red lips. A scornful gleam in his gray eyes.

"If it wasn't for my promise—if only we men were mixed up in the game—I reckon old Top Notch would open her blessed eyes this evening!" he muttered, with a low laugh that sounded recklessness itself. "I'd show the sharps that it don't all lay in bigness! But it won't do—I've got to get that poor devil out of the wet, and there's mighty little time to cut to waste, too!"

One far less experienced in wild life might easily have divined this truth. The uproar was increasing. Already one could distinguish words and sentences amid the half-drunken, wholly savage cries and oaths.

"It's catching before hanging, my gentle lambs," laughed the Cool Hand as he slipped into a stable back of the hotel, pausing beside a clean-limbed, trimly-built white mule.

With rapid dexterity Pistol Johnny saddled and bridled the animal, then led it out through the door. As he did so, his white teeth gleamed for an instant beneath his blonde mustaches, his eyes glowing like balls of heated steel.

Through the coming shades of evening, he caught sight of a mob of men swarming through the town, yelling and cursing, flourishing knives and pistols, plainly drunken with whisky and a lust for blood. And near their head his keen eyes recognized the squat, muscular form of Hod Geary, the man whose eyes showed the plain imprint of his knuckles.

"It's Jay Dillon's work, but you are the tool he uses to stir up the animals, while he hangs back at a safe distance to laugh at their roaring. All right, if you only think so, pardner!"

With a word to Al Borak, his white mule, Pistol Johnny strode forward, the intelligent creature leading the way with as much promptness as though it knew just where it was needed most.

"Thar he is!" vociferated Hod Geary, excitedly, as his wandering gaze rested on the figures in advance. "That's his white mule! Down him, lads! He's goin' to make a break fer it! Down him fer keeps!"

"Stand back, men of Top Notch!" thundered the Cool Hand, wheeling with a revolver glittering in each hand, emphasizing his words. "Keep your linen on, my gentle lambs!"

"Down him!" snarled Geary, dodging back into the thick of the mob.

"Listen to a man not to that howling cur, men of Top Notch! Once before this day I saved you from hanging an innocent man, and I'll do it again if I have to! When Tracy Unwin is wanted to answer a regular charge before an honest court, I'll produce him. He is in my charge. I am his defender, with tongue, hand or weapons. Just pause for a moment until you can comprehend all those words mean. You have heard of me before to-day. You know that I can bite—and bite mighty deep when I'm cornered. Don't try to corner me now, or there'll be music without end!"

"It's only one man ag'inst a hundred!" howled Geary, viciously.

"But that one man is John Woodcock, bear in mind, gentlemen!"

Cold and penetrating his tones. A grim defiance in every letter.

"I am going to my office. Follow me if you

like, but don't step on my heels. For your own sake I say this, remember."

The white mule was still in motion, and Pistol Johnny followed after, still facing the crowd, still keeping his pistols in open view.

In vain Hod Geary howled and cursed by turns. Though the mob kept moving along, those in advance seemed anything but anxious to overtake that one little man.

The white mule stopped short in front of the building in which its master had left Tracy Unwin, and Pistol Johnny struck the door with his heel as he still faced the crowd with ready tools. And as the door opened, he hastily muttered:

"We've got to make a break, or go up a tree, par!! Climb into the saddle, but wait for the word—so!"

Without a word Tracy Unwin obeyed, and a wild curse broke from the lips of Hod Geary as he saw this movement. He rushed forward, forgetting his own peril in the dread of failure.

"They're runnin' away, lads! Ketch 'em—kill 'em!"

As he broke through the line, he paused and raised a revolver, aiming at the figure on the white mule, just as its owner sprang lightly upon its back behind Tracy Unwin, but seated with face to the rear.

"You fired first, you cur! Down you go, for keeps!" gratingly cried Pistol Johnny, his weapon flashing forth a death-note.

Without even a groan, the stunted Hercules flung up his hands and fell to the ground in a lifeless heap. And as the white mule dashed away at full speed, a shower of bullets cut the air about them.

CHAPTER XII.

STEEL-FACE PLAYS ANOTHER CARD.

"ONE word above the gentlest whispers, and out goes your light forever, my dainty blossom!"

A gloved hand covering her lips, curved at the wrist so as to allow the elbow to press heavily on her breast, holding her motionless and helpless beneath its weight; a bared blade flashing before her eyes in the dim light of a single candle; a masked face hovering over her, with eyes glittering like those of an enraged serpent.

Such was the awakening of Mabel Carter on the night of the day following the strange vanishment of her brother Howard.

That one convulsive start as she felt the gloved hand settle on her lips, breaking the spell of unconsciousness that bound her, was all.

That menacing blade sent a chill of terror through her heart. The strange, croaking voice seemed to curdle her blood and paralyze her limbs; it was like naught human—it seemed part and parcel of some horrible nightmare!

"Business is business, and I'm its apostle, little witch!" croaked the night raven, lifting his ugly weapon to the length of his arm, then flashing it downward until its keen point almost touched the tender skin beneath his scorching gaze. "I have no time to waste in repeating my warnings. First my tongue, then the steel. Forget that you are a woman, and don't try to play the fool. You understand?"

There was no answer, with that hand over her lips, that elbow pressing heavily upon her chest. But the glittering eyes that looked down upon those of the maiden, seemed content with what they could read therein.

"You are in Gold Hills, a guest at the Ten Stamp Hotel. The landlord is a coward, but even he would risk a shot or a foot of cold steel in your defense were you to lift that dainty voice of yours in a song of aid. Not twenty feet away from where you are now lying, Lee Facer is asleep. He will break his fool-neck in answer to an appeal from you—and so would half a hundred men in this camp.

"That is one side of the canvas: let me show you the other."

"I've risked my neck to get here. I've got you in my grip. Before I let that go, I'd slit your throat from ear to ear! I don't yearn to do this, mind you, Mabel Carter. I've got other and more profitable uses to put you to, as you may guess from my daring to come here after this fashion: as you may guess when I tell you that I have your brother safe and snugly stowed away, awaiting the coming of his dearly beloved sister. Careful, my beauty!" with a grating earnestness in that harsh peculiar voice, as the maiden shivered anew at those words. "Don't make me fit you for the sexton!"

Again the bare steel quivered before her eyes until it sent out a chilling flash in the dim rays of the one candle near the head of the bed. The gloved hand clung more closely to her lips. The elbow lowered another inch, sending a dull suffocating pain to her heart.

"Plain language, isn't it?" muttered the mask, with a laugh that was even worse than his croaking gravity. "With more leisure, and fewer neighbors, I could coo in your shell-like ears as gently as any dove. I'd clothe each syllable with silk and velvet, and trim every sentence with ermine. But now—business is business, you know!"

Mabel made no effort to free herself, though

she felt that her heart and lungs could not much longer endure this double oppression. That soul-sickening horror seemed to fade away like magic, and she returned that mocking, threatening glare with a gaze as steady as fate. In her eyes was a question which the night raven seemed to interpret:

"What is it I demand? Unconditional surrender, my beauty-bird! Unbroken silence on your part, until I give you permission to use that silver bell-clapper of yours. No row, no hurt. Swear that you will not attempt to cry out, or utter a sound above the key I am setting you now, and I'll open your valves for a fresh supply of oxygen. If you are willing to swear, bat your pretty peepers three times."

Steadily, at regular intervals, Mabel Carter closed and lifted her lids, then gazed unwaveringly into the masked face hanging over her. The signal was plain enough, but the night raven still seemed to doubt, seemed to think he had made a rash proposition, or else to fear she would not be able to resist both terror and temptation.

"You want to think twice, my pretty angel," he croaked, harshly, again passing the ugly blade close before her eyes. "You women are so used to hearing men whisper lies, that you may mistake me for one of that class: and that would be a pity—for you!"

With that steady pressure sealing her lips, the maiden could not speak, of course, but once more she closed and opened her eyes thrice.

"You do mean it, then?" and the mask removed his heavy hand, though still menacing her with his weapon. "I'll take your promise, and reward you accordingly. Don't let that slip your mind, dearie!"

Mabel gasped for breath as the hand was lifted from her lips, that heavy weight from her chest. That was her only sound, her only motion, until she was able to speak audibly.

"I have promised. I will raise no alarm, unless you compel me to do so. Now tell me what is the meaning of this dastardly intrusion?"

Steady, unfalteringly came the words. Steady, even haughty her gaze.

The steadiest nerved man in all that lawless region could not have shown cooler courage than did this helpless maiden just then.

Steel-face—for this was but another of his unscrupulous moves in playing for time on behalf of his master for the day—bit his lips beneath his mask until blood tinged his teeth. He could hardly bring himself to believe that this was the weak, nervous, trembling girl whom he had found so much trouble in soothing and strengthening that day just past. So easy to hoodwink then; so unsuspecting, so confiding, so easily gulled!

And now—dangerously calm under circumstances which might easily have upset the nerves of a professional desperado! Would she be so easily handled? Could he carry out the scheme he had shaped?

"It means pure business, Mabel Carter," he replied, after those uncomfortable thoughts flashed across his active brain. "It means sure death to you if you cut up rusty."

"And if I submit in silence?"

"Not a hair of your head shall come to harm," was the swift response. "A little inconvenience, maybe; but nothing worse than that."

"Who and what are you? In what respect have I injured you?"

"I'm only an instrument in another's hand, bless you, beauty-bird!" with a low, croaking laugh, so different from any sound which she had before heard from the lips of the man whom a kind providence had appeared to raise up for her in her sudden extremity. "I've got no grudge against you—how should I have? Until this time last night I never even suspected that such a person drew the breath of life!"

Mabel Carter gave a start, stifling a cry as he spoke.

"My poor brother! You are at the bottom of that, too!"

"Plump center, first shot!" croaked the mask, but with his knife quivering nearer to her throat in silent warning. "I had to do the job in sections, as it were, and of course I tackled the harder portion first. Do you want to meet your brother again this side of the spirit world, my angel?"

There was no response. The poor girl dared not risk her voice with that ugly bit of metal so near. Her sudden nerve was deserting her as she thought of Howard.

Steel-face saw this, and chuckled in his black heart. She would be easier to manage if he could only keep her thus.

"Howard Carter is alive and well, but how long he will be in that comfortable situation, depends mainly on your good sense. If you kick up a bobby, there will be two to suffer for one's folly. You *sabe*?"

The poor child closed her eyes, sick and faint. And Steel-face silently dropped his knife to nimbly use his fingers, whipping forth a heavy silken handkerchief, the center folds of which contained a lump of some substance, egg-shaped and of about the same size.

One gloved hand closed on the throat of the maiden, lifting her head from the pillow, stifling

the involuntary cry that rose from her lungs. The other hand pressed the lump between her lips, then both hands firmly knotted the silken ends fairly behind her neck.

"For your own good, pretty bird," he croaked, as he permitted her head to fall back, the gag performing its work to perfection. "I know you were honest in giving me that pledge, but being a woman, I dare not trust you too far. Now, listen to my gentle love-song!"

"It is not of own making, mind you," with a coarse, mocking laugh, barely loud enough to reach her ears, as he sat on the edge of the bed, playing with his knife and watching her closely through the twin apertures in his sable mask.

"I'm no amorous knight, no love-lorn cavalier, trying to carry the heart of fair lady by storm. Not a bit of it! I'm simply the chosen tool of one who loves so madly that she has sworn naught between heaven and hell shall balk her purpose.

"You are Mabel Carter. You are the promised bride of one Tracy Unwin, at present residing at a little mining-town near here, known as Top Notch. Careful, my fluttering pigeon!" with a croaking chuckle as the tortured maiden lifted her head, only to be pressed back on her pillow by that gloved hand. "Don't make me use steel to remove the dainty stumbling-block in the path of my mistress! Don't, I beg of you!"

Shivering, moaning, Mabel Carter yielded to that brutal pressure.

Steel-face hung over her for a moment, his eyes blazing maliciously into hers. There was no mercy in the organ that served him as a heart. He was a born fiend, rather than aught human. He took an exquisite pleasure in torturing the helpless being whom fate had placed in his power.

During that day he had received the note which Jay Dillon sent off in hot haste by special messenger, just after being so unexpectedly foiled and crippled by Pistol Johnny. It contained only a few lines, bidding him play for time, even at the risk of his own neck in so doing.

The courier told him what had taken place at and near Top Notch. The fellow, not being one of the inner circle, could only speak of what showed on the surface, and hence Steel-face had to do some guessing at the actual state of the game he was playing in connection with Jay Dillon. He knew enough to see that it would be ruinous to permit the heirs of Thompson Jones—or Anson Carter—to reach Top Notch at that stage of the game. He feared that Tracy Unwin or his new-found friend would hasten to meet the twain, and thus he felt obliged to alter his plans somewhat.

Howard Carter was already disposed of, and his sister must follow him, leaving no sign behind to tell how or by what means she had disappeared. He had secured a perfect *alibi* for himself in the case of his first victim; he must be as prudent with the sister.

It was no very difficult task for his crafty brain to figure out a plan that promised easy success, but his inborn cruelty made him add mental torture to physical indignity.

"You hastened here on the perfumed pinions of love, panting with impatience to fall into the strong arms of your lover bold! And he—the gallant Tracy? Let me tell you a scandalous truth, little one.

"While you were living on memory and hope, back in your Eastern home, Tracy Unwin was here, spicing his daily labor with forbidden fruit! It comes hard, I know, little chick, but the truth is mighty, and even I can't twist it into a lie at this dead hour of the night!"

"Mind you, I don't say that your lover has entirely forgotten you. I don't say that he is quite ready to throw your love over his shoulder. But I must say he has been playing the lover to another woman until he has fastened a chain upon his future which death alone can sever. I do say that unless he has better luck than falls to the lot of most men who play with fire, he's in for a mighty hot scorching if he don't bury the past entirely and stick to the present.

"In a moment of remorse or forgetfulness he let drop the fact of your coming to this part of the world. And she, the woman who has sworn to mate with your lover, has sworn to win or ruin!"

"No matter how she came to select me as her tool. No matter what claim she has on my services. Enough that I am bound to obey her lightest word without question or hesitation. If she had bidden me drive this bit of cold steel to the bottom of your heart, I could only have carried out her will, with a modest sigh of regret at the stern necessity that armed my hand.

"Why do I tell you all this, pretty pigeon? Simply to show you why I took the trouble to make you a call at this ghastly hour of the night. Simply to let you see how unavailing any prayer or entreaty on your part will be, when you are restored your speech. For myself, a kinder-hearted rascal never slit a throat or rifled a corpse. But when I am working under orders—and particularly when those orders come from the ruby-red lips of the future Mrs. Tracy Unwin—I am a machine that can move in only the course lined out in advance.

"Now for my orders: I am not to kill you,

nor even ruffle one of your dainty feathers more than I am absolutely obliged to. I am to escort you from this hotel to a safe and snug retreat which shall be nameless for the present, there to hold and pacify you as best I can until my mistress has time enough to complete her conquest. That may be a day, a week, or even longer: but the end will be the same. She will win, and for your own comfort, you ought to wish her speedy success!"

"When she has won—when Tracy Unwin is fairly her captive, held in the silken meshes of matrimony—word will come to me, and both yourself and brother will be restored to freedom, to act as best suits your disposition."

During his rapid revelation, Mabel Carter was struggling hard for composure. She partially succeeded, aided in the conquest by her unshaken faith in the lover whom this malignant rascal was calumniating. Only for those first few moments did she doubt. Then, as she gazed steadily into those evilly glowing eyes, she knew that all this was but a tissue of lies, false *in toto*.

If this was so, and she could not doubt the truth of her sudden convictions, then could she place any trust in the ruffian? Could she believe him when he declared that he meant to take her, safe and unharmed, to her missing brother?

She closed her eyes with a faint shiver as she decided to the contrary. Closed them, too, quite as much to hide the sudden resolution which she had taken to at all hazards foil this demon with the voice of a raven!

"I've taken all this trouble to avoid using still harsher means with you, little chicken," aided Steel-face, still using that curious voice so unlike his natural tones. "I don't want to cut your life threads short if I can help it. But I've got to carry out my instructions to the very letter! I've got to get you out of this hotel, and before many minutes, too!"

"I don't want to crowd you any closer than I have to, Miss Carter," he added, rising from his seat on the edge of the bed, but still keeping his gaze riveted on her pale face. "I'd give you more rope, if orders weren't so terribly strict. I'd put the door between us, but that might prove too powerful a temptation to one in your predicament; with a lover hanging in the balance, so to speak!"

He caught up the clothes which lay on a chair, and tossed them on the bed, adding:

"Dress yourself, Miss Carter, with as little delay as may be. I will stretch the limits far enough to turn my back while you are thus engaged; but please bear in mind that I have the ears of a cat, as well as the claws of a tiger. If I catch a single suspicious sound, so much the worse for you!"

Holding his hands behind his back after such a fashion that his bared knife was distinctly visible, Steel-face crossed the narrow room and took his stand at the closed door. In clear, yet guarded accents, came his further speech:

"Slip on your dress, Miss Carter. Never mind stopping to primp, for time is fleeting, and I never was anything of a lady's man! I'd hate to take oath that I could decide whether or no your dress was on top-end down, or the contrary! To work—and in perfect silence!"

His repeated warning was not wholly without use. Mabel's first impulse was to tear that gag from over her lips and with a shrill cry for help, spring from bed and endeavor to elude the ruffian until aid could come. She felt that would be prompt indeed. She felt that Lee Facer would be at her door in a single minute. But would that be time enough? Would not this merciless demon with the voice of a raven kill her before the door could be broken down?

Rising in bed, the poor girl hastily slipped her garments over her head, as she did so, with her hands hidden thus, she partially loosened the silken handkerchief. Then she slipped to the floor, hurriedly fastening her garments as well as her trembling fingers could perform that task. None the nearer that the eyes of her masked visitor were once more turned upon her. Truly he must be gifted with the ears of a cat, since he caught the sound of her bare feet on the floor.

"Put on your foot-gear, little chicken," he muttered, shortly. "Of course I'll not make you travel all the way on your own trotters, but until we are clear of town I reckon you'll have to do a little walking, unless you prefer to be carried in my arms!"

Mabel obeyed, quickly drawing on stockings and boots, then rising erect, an appealing light in her eyes. Or so at least her enemy interpreted that look, for he muttered with an ugly laugh:

"Sorry, but orders are orders, and I'm a machine, you know! You've got to take a night-ride with me as escort, but I'll make it as light on you as possible. I'll promise not to talk when you prefer silence. Or I'll buzz in your ears until you cry enough! If that suits your ideas better!"

With his gloved hand he put out the candle, then moved across the room and took down the heavy blanket which hung over the narrow window; for the first time noticed by Mabel.

He raised the sash, propping it up with a nail, leaning his head and body through the opening

as though looking for some one whom he expected to see close at hand.

Mabel caught her breath with a faint gasp as a sudden hope leaped up in her breast. Inspired by the position assumed by the mask, she wondered if it was not possible to push him headlong through the window—if she could but catch his feet and destroy his balance?

It was a desperate expedient, and might result in worse than failure, but she was half-insane with fear and apprehension for the future. She moved forward with hands extended—only to fail!

Did this man with the croak of a raven in his throat possess eyes in the back of his head? It seemed almost as though this must be one of his gifts, for he wheeled swiftly, catching her hands and holding them with cruel force as he grimly laughed:

"Would you, little chicken? Would you tackle the hawk with those tiny claws? Bah! you poor fool! Think you I'd enter in a game like this without feeling sure of success? Think you I'd make a break like that if I wasn't ready to foil your effort?"

With a sudden motion he brought both her hands together, holding them with one of his own, drawing her to the window, using his other hand to twist the heavy blanket about her head and shoulders.

He cast another glance outside, chuckling grimly as he caught sight of two shadowy figures drawing near. And leaning out the window he uttered a low, peculiar whistle. Almost immediately there came an echo, and lifting Mabel in his arms, he thrust her through the opening, gripping her shoulders tightly as he lowered her to the full length of his arms. Holding her thus for an instant, he released her.

A curse hissed through his clicking teeth as the blanket held fast, caught on the buttons which secured his gloves. He shook the blanket free, and looked out, to see Mabel Carter twist free from the hands of his confederates and tear the handkerchief from her lips, then uttering a shrill, piercing shriek for help!

"Thousand curses on those infernal idiots!" snarled Steel-face as he thrust his feet through the window—only to pause as a loud yell rent the air and several dark figures sprung into view, running toward the scene.

Another shriek from the maiden as she felt the fierce grip of a ruffian on her shoulder. A shout from the approaching men, accompanied by a brace of pistol-shots.

"That settles it for this bout, anyway!" snarled Steel-face, quickly drawing in his feet and gliding silently across the room, unlocking the door and hastening back to his own chamber, where he hastily tore off his disguise and crammed it under the bed, until he had more time at his disposal. "Curses on those clumsy devils! They've got the whole camp in an uproar!"

The sound of shots and angry yells came to his ears as he tore open his door again and rushed down-stairs, pistol in hand, resolved to play a bold hand in his proper person. If his tools were caught—if there was enough breath left in their bodies to shape words—he must be there to put a close seal on their lips!

His fears were without foundation in fact, as it proved. The two ruffians, seeing that it meant death to linger, had taken to flight, escaping in the shadows of night. Mabel Carter was unhurt, and Steel-face knew that his game was not yet lost as the poor child flung herself in his arms, sobbing and gasping with fright as he led her back, saying:

"I'll keep guard myself, dear child! You have nothing more to fear!"

CHAPTER XIII.

LAYING A GHOST.

STEEL-FACE made the best of a bad matter, and if he rather over-acted the guard-mounting for the remainder of that night, Mabel Carter failed to see it. Her nerves were far too sorely shaken by that adventure for her to be critical, or to note the slightest blemish in the only friend (2) she had left her, at least within reach.

Fat Ebenezer Flick, though hardly cut out for a hero, was so indignant at this abuse of his hospitality that he armed himself with a rifle and walked a beat until dawn, stubbornly declining to obey the vinegarish commands of his spouse. And when the day fairly broke, and there was more time for talking the outrage over, our worthy host still further immortalized himself by vowing to keep open bar and free tobacco forever-and-a-day to the man or men who should bring those dastardly villains to justice.

"Where I kin see 'em full hemp, mind ye," was his saving clause.

Lee Facer was one of the most busy in trying to pick up a clew to the author of that outrage. He even found and followed the trail of the rascals for nearly a mile beyond the limits of Gold Hills before finally losing the scent; for scent it surely seemed, since his eyes were the only organs in the party of sufficient keenness to read the sign which, at intervals, his finger would point out.

This was not the only smooth work which Steel-face placed to his credit on that morning.

He called on Mabel Carter, and drew from her lips a complete account of her recent experience, his voice mellow, his touch tender and soothing, his whole manner the personification of paternal love and sympathy.

Time and again did he urge Mabel to describe the figure and voice and little mannerisms of her midnight visitor, carefully jotting them down in a note-book, then reading them over for her approval or emendation. And then, though there was a perplexed frown upon his broad, white forehead, Lee Facer declared his belief that before the sun set again, he would bring the audacious villain to her for complete identification.

"I never want to set eyes on him again!" with a shiver of mingled fear and aversion. "Not even to see him punished!"

"Your heart is speaking now," and Steel-face bowed with approval that better fitted his assumed than his real character. "And yet, if only to hear him tell the truth—if only to have him clear away the mass of foul calumnies with which he tried to crush your heart and brain—"

He stopped short as the maiden grasped his arm, hope and fear conflicting in her great eyes.

The villain smiled blandly, knowing right well what it was she would ask of him. And without waiting for the poor girl to gather composure sufficient to fully command her voice, he uttered:

"I told you I knew Tracy Unwin by sight and by reputation. While I can hardly say that I am acquainted with him, Top Notch is such a very small place that each one in it knows every other person's business and affairs. And I earnestly assure you that Mr. Unwin is innocent of any such duplicity as this: I know for a fact that he is not entangled with any woman living in this part of the country. And why that impudent varlet should bring such an accusation against him, is more than I can comprehend!"

In fine, Steel-face seemed to find a peculiar pleasure in roundly abusing his other self. And it was with real reluctance that he tore himself away from the "charming simpleton," as he mentally dubbed Mabel Carter, for the pretended purpose of renewing search for the impudent scoundrel who had so nearly succeeded in abducting her.

All Gold Hills was pretty thoroughly worked up over the affairs of this young couple from the States, one of whom had so strangely vanished from their midst, and the other of whom had so narrowly escaped a like fate.

Of course it was all off a piece; the same agency was underlying both the actual and the attempted kidnapping; but who and what were these daring criminals? What end were they working for? Was it in hopes of securing a heavy ransom, or did the finger of private vengeance play the most prominent part?

The only man who could have fully answered these questions, kept his own counsel, as a matter of course. Even at that early hour of the day he was rearranging his cards, preparing to gain his ends by another style of play.

As yet no word had come from the direction of Silver City, whence a messenger had been sent to confirm or disprove the belief expressed by the foot-sore prospector that one of the three horsemen whom he had noted riding in that direction, was the missing Howard Carter. Steel-face cared little for the delay, one way or the other.

It was his invention, placed in the mouth of the courier sent off in such hot haste by Jay Dillon the evening before from Top Notch, to warn his ally of trouble in camp. The fellow told his story well, and Steel-face lost no time in dispatching a courier to Silver City; a man whom all Gold Hills knew, and who little suspected the real nature of his long and hard ride.

Well along toward noon, Steel-face caught sight of a horseman entering Gold Hills, coming apparently from the direction of Top Notch. A second look brought a quick flash into his cold eyes, and first making sure that he was observed by the horseman, he made a peculiar gesture, then walked rapidly away until he cleared the little mining-town.

The rider dismounted, secured his horse in front of a saloon, entering barely long enough to take one hasty drink, then followed in the track of the iceberg sport.

"Well, Dickory?" frowned Steel-face as he stepped from behind a clump stunted bushes.

"Word from the boss," grunted the courier, producing a scrap of paper, closely sealed. "Said the quicker I put that in your hand, the bigger my pay'd be!"

Stepping aside, Steel-face opened the note and read the few lines it contained, scowling darkly as though the information thus conveyed was anything but agreeable to his mind. Twice over he read the note, then struck a match and watched the paper until it was entirely consumed and the feathery ashes scattered on the mild breeze that fanned his face. Then he turned to the messenger, speaking sharply:

"The boss said you could tell me what more I needed to know. Go on; what happened in camp? How did those two devils manage to give you all the slip? Cursed bungling of some sort, sure!"

Tersely the fellow told how Hod Geary came to his death while trying to rush the citizens in a hanging mob upon Tracy Unwin and his champion.

"They was lead enough sent after the critters to've anchored a three-decker in a gale!" he added, showing his teeth in a half-abashed grin. "But somehow nothin' couldn't faze 'em. Ef they was tetch'd more then skin deep, we couldn't sw'ar to it."

"Two men, on a mule, and yet they got away with all Top Notch!"

"Got away from 'em, anyway. I ain't so mighty sure 'bout the men part of it—not nigh so sure as I'd like to be, boss!" with a dubious shake of the head and an involuntary glance over his shoulders, as though half-anticipating an unwelcome apparition. "Ef Pistol Johnny ain't the devil himself, then he's too mighty close akin to be funny!"

"Man or devil, I'll try him a round the first chance I get," coldly spoke Steel-face, his eyes glittering dangerously. "Let that pass for now. How much rest will you need before riding back to Top Notch?"

The courier hesitated, seeming anything but pleased at the prospect thus shadowed forth. But he knew the man who spoke and decided.

"It's nigh grub-time, ain't it? Waal, fill my jacket full, an' I'll be ready to start when you nod."

"That will do. Go back and put in the time as suits you best, just so you don't fill up too full on poison. You've got to make a straight stretch back to the boss, without taking a lay-over by the way. You sabe?"

Left alone by the messenger, Steel-face fell into deep thought. Not altogether agreeable, were one to judge from the evil glittering of his eyes. And more than once there came curses to his lips, in close connection with the name of Jay Dillon.

"If I only had a chance to whisper a dozen words into your ear, you hot-head! If I had time to send you a message, even! To-morrow, is it? All right!" flinging back his head and shaking his shoulders. "You are engineering this little racket, and I'm only a deck-hand. It shall be just as you say, and if failure follows, I'll have the satisfaction of cursing you up hill and down, anyway!"

Mabel Carter could hardly eat the neat lunch which Ebenezer Flick brought to her with his own hands. She had not seen or heard anything of Mr. Facer since early in the day. Where was he? What was he doing? Had anything been discovered? Had a messenger come from Top Notch or Silver City?

Ebenezer Flick could give her scant satisfaction. No word had been received from either place, and as for Mr. Facer—

He put in an appearance just as his name was crossing the lips of the fat host, who incontinently waddled away as though the most important business demanded his immediate attention.

Mabel Carter cast one look into that pale, immobile countenance, then sprung to her feet with clasped hands, her eyes aglow, her voice shaken with strong emotion as she panted:

"You bring tidings? Some one—he has come?"

No need the emphasis on that little pronoun, for one so shrewd as Steel-face, and he smiled ever so faintly as he shook his head, saying:

"It is not time yet, dear child. It is a long and rough trail between here and Top Notch, remember. And even on horseback one cannot accomplish miracles."

The poor girl sunk back on her seat with a stifled sigh, heartsick with hope deferred. But something in the manner of her visitor made her blood bound rapidly as he took her hand, speaking swiftly:

"Hope for the best, little one. I believe I have struck a clew that will lead to the speedy restoration of your brother."

"The man has come back from Silver City?"

Steel-face shook his head, growing grave and giving her the impression that he regretted having spoken so speedily.

"You must not ask me any more just now, my dear. You must not be too sure, for there is still a chance that I may be mistaken in my hope—the clew may fail, though I pray not."

And this was all he would tell her, beyond bidding her "brace up" and hope for the best.

Downstairs in the bar of the hotel there was considerable excitement, the center of which was a man fairly well acquainted in Gold Hills, though not a citizen.

He had a strange story to tell, and told it in a manner that made the scalp of the more superstitious fairly creep and crawl with a delicious torture as they listened.

"Mebbe I'm a fool. Mebbe I'm drunk. Mebbe I fell asleep an' dreamed it all!" he grunted, with a sidelong glance toward Steel-face, who had just returned to the office. "Mebbe I be—an' mebbe them as tries to climb 'way up on top o' sech durn foolishin' kin pick up grit enough to take my back-track an' git right thar when the hour o' midnight comes! Mebbe—but wurned ef I ain't copperin' that guess with every grain o' oro in my wardrobe! Waal, I jest is!"

Steel-face smiled coldly, a half-contemptuous gleam in his eyes.

"Do you think you could follow your trail back to the spot where you—where this ghost first made itself heard?"

"Then you've come 'round? You kin call it a ghost your own self?" half-sulkily, half-triumphantly retorted the other.

"After all you have said?" with arching brows. "I'd just as soon think of doubting my own identity! Of course it was a ghost, and if you can pilot me back to that spot, I'll promise to lay it forever!"

There was an interested buzz among those present at this bold speech, for the majority knew that Lee Facer rarely made an offer which he was not able and ready to back up with deeds. The hero of the ghost story seemed taken aback, and was slow about answering.

"Look here, my good fellow," said Steel-face in a business-like manner, drawing forth a plump wallet from his breast pocket. "Time is money, and I'll pay you your own price for the use of a few hours of your time. Name your figures, and consider them accepted beforehand."

"Fer to do what?"

"To guide me to the spot where you encountered this ghost."

Still the fellow hesitated, though he unconsciously licked his lips as his eyes caught sight of the money displayed significantly.

"If you are anyways delicate about going to the exact spot, then guide me near enough to direct me there. Come—money talks!"

"I'll do that, anyhow!" with sudden resolution. "I'll p'int out the place, but I won't go clean thar. Mebbe you ain't skeered, but ghosts an' spooks an' all sech al'ays did turn my stomach!"

"Fortify it with a horn or two of 'Nezer's best, and make up your mind what figures suits the case. I'll never kick! And if what I rather more than fancy is the truth of this ghost business should turn out correct, all Gold Hills can get howling drunk at my expense this night!"

Steel-face would not say just what he expected to discover, and it is a little remarkable that no one suspected the truth; for it had come to be generally accepted that Howard Carter had gone to Silver City, either on business of his own, or as a captive in unscrupulous hands.

By the time Steel-face was ready to take the trail, the ghost tale had spread over Gold Hills, and a motley crowd were in readiness to join or follow the "ghost-layer!"

Steel-face smiled grimly as he saw this, but it did not appear to annoy him in the least. He paused to whisper another warning into the shrinking ear of the fat host; he was on no account to permit Miss Carter to learn aught of this expedition until its return.

"Now, my good fellow, lead the way by the shortest cut to this uneasy spook of yours," laughed Steel-face as he left the hotel and moved rapidly through the camp. "But you want to bear in mind that it's a case of no find, no pay!"

The man gave a crusty growl, his jaws falling a trifle.

"Who's to say what a spook'll do or whar it'll go? Kin I freeze the critter fast, whar I see its groanin' jest at break o' day?"

"You jump at conclusions too rashly, my friend," with a slight show of his white teeth. "You show me the spot where you first heard your ghost, and I'll do the rest. 'But if you try to play me dirt, your wages will go to pay for planting you under the daisies!'"

The fellow grinned, more at ease.

"That's a gray boss of a different color, boss! I ain't skeered the ground'll run away. But I ain't bankin' onto the spook, mind ye!"

Briskly the party left Gold Hills behind them. Party, since nearly every able-bodied man in town had joined the procession, curious to see the end of a genuine ghost-hunt.

The guide said he could lead the way direct to the spot, without wasting the time in picking out the trail he had left behind him.

"Fer a mile or two, I reckon I must 'a' tuck steps forty foot atween toe an' heel," he grinned, half-sheepishly.

He proved his skill by guiding the party direct to the spot, some few miles out of Gold Hills, and in the wildest, roughest portion of the adjacent range. And Steel-face laughed shortly as he followed the direction in which the fellow was pointing.

"Ten to one I can name your ghost without going a foot nearer!"

He sprang forward at a rapid pace, showing the activity and sure-footedness of a mountain sheep as he leaped from rock to rock, lowering himself from ledge to ledge until the bottom of the valley was gained in safety.

Without pausing to see how his followers were getting along, the cool sharp ran briskly up the valley, pausing at an ugly pile of gravel and bits of stone, near the center of which opened the mouth of a pit.

"Hallo!" he shouted, kneeling and peering down the ruined shaft, keeping his balance by grasping a stunted bush to one side. "Hallo! down the shaft! Be ye ghost or goblin—"

A faint cry came soaring in reply, and Steel-face sprang to his feet with a wild hurrah! He flung his hat high into the air, beckoning the astonished crowd to hasten, then again turned to the dark hole.

"Who are you? What is your name?"

"Howard Carter!" came the prompt response, this time in much more distinct tones; so distinct that a few of the nearest citizens caught the words and echoed them back in wondering joy.

"Just the man we're looking for!" cried Steel-face, cheerily. "Be patient a bit longer, and we'll snake you out of that in a holy second! How deep is it, anyway? Will we have to send for a rope?"

"Not deep—only twenty feet or so."

Even this was an exaggeration, as it afterward proved, but no one thought of questioning it then. For just as the men started to look up a slender tree which might be utilized as a ladder, the guide uttered a shout of wondering triumph, holding up a coil of rope, thickly studded with knots, which he had stumbled across under a covering of leaves and twigs.

With a score of strong men steadying this, Lee Facer was quickly lowering himself into the pit, soon alighting astride of Howard Carter, still bound and helpless, but with a gagging handkerchief hanging loosely about his neck.

"Not a word at present, my dear fellow," said Steel-face, his keen knife quickly setting the dude at liberty as far as his limbs were concerned. "First thing is to get you out of this hole. Do you know, my lad, that you are a ghost? A simon pure spook?"

Howard Carter only groaned in reply. The blood was beginning to course freely through his benumbed limbs as Steel-face briskly rubbed them, giving him exquisite torture while the sensation lasted.

Steel-face knotted the rope around the body of the young man, then steadied him as high as his arms could reach, while bidding the men hoist away.

A dozen strong hands caught at the little dude, drawing him out of the pit, amid excited cries and questions. And shortly afterward Steel-face returned to the surface, with a roll of dirty cloth clutched in one hand. It was by substituting this for the stone, that his captors led Howard to believe the pit was practically bottomless!

Little could or would be accomplished until the rescued man told enough of his adventures to satisfy their appetite, and after a modest drink of brandy from the wicker flask which Steel-trap pressed upon him, Howard Carter complied with the general wish.

Without exaggeration, he briefly detailed the manner of his capture and enforced journey to the present spot. He told how his captors were met by another rascal, with a strangely-harsh, croaking voice. And when Steel-face uttered a short exclamation of angry surprise, he paused to ask what it meant.

"I'll tell you all when we get you safely in town again," was the grave response. "We also have a tale to tell, but yours takes precedence. You were saying?"

Without entering fully into the reasons advanced by the night raven, Howard Carter told the rest of his adventure with reasonable clearness. He said that he fully expected death from that fall, and he actually swooned away before he could touch the bottom.

When he came back to life, he found himself bound hand and foot, with a gag between his jaws, not so tight as to endanger his life by suffocation, but too adroitly applied for rubbing loose.

He said that the day passed without a sound from without, though he could look up and see the sky distinctly. But when night came again he was visited by two masked men, who gave him food and drink, squatting beside him and feeding him with their fingers. They again promised him life and liberty, on certain conditions, but he would not yield.

If they fed him, his life was in no great peril, he thought, and it was possible that an accident might result in his discovery at any moment. So, with grim threats of future torture, his captors left him.

During the night last past, he contrived to free his jaws from the gag, and with the first rays of dawn, he began shouting aloud for help.

Steel-face smiled broadly as he glanced at the guide, who was listening open-mouthed to this strange recital. This was his ghost!

"I reckon it is, but durned ef I b'lieve it!" he muttered, stupidly.

When the universal curiosity was partly appeased, Steel-face had a rude litter fashioned, and though Howard declared that he could walk with the best and strongest among them, he was placed thereon and willing hands bore him rapidly down the valley, by the easiest route home.

Steel-face, with a whispered word to the bearers, started off by a shorter cut over the rocks, to break the glad tidings to Mabel Carter.

Never mind how the poor child received him when she knew that he had succeeded in finding the missing youth. She showed her gratitude as only a true, pure-hearted woman can; and the arch-hypocrite never flinched, never lost that genial smile for an instant.

He had almost to use force in restraining Mabel, but when she saw Howard coming up the street, on his own feet, she broke away and—

CHAPTER XIV.

A TRUMP-CARD WASTED.

TOM DICKORY told a square story when he gave Steel-face that note from Jay Dillon. Incredible as it may seem, nevertheless it was a positive fact that both Pistol Johnny and Tracy Unwin had passed unscathed through that fiery ordeal; that Al Borak had carried them both safely out of Top Notch and beyond pistol-shot.

And though Jay Dillon, as soon as he could reach camp, urged armed men in hot pursuit, they had only their trouble for reward. And when no signs were discovered—when the most persistent search failed to uncover the fugitives—there were not lacking superstitious fellows, who shook their shaggy heads gravely, muttering about the foul fiend and the bad luck which must follow all who dared mix in a game of his planning.

After all, they had some excuse for such mad fancies. The day had been crowded with strange happenings, beginning with the coming of Jay Dillon with the tidings from the Lone Cabin.

What had become of Thompson Jones? How had his bloody corpse disappeared without leaving the slightest clue? How had that red accusation been changed into a clumsy joke?

For the flight of Tracy Unwin had produced this effect—hardly a man in Top Notch but what now firmly believed him the assassin of their fellow-citizen.

Jay Dillon was not slow to note this change, and he made the most of it. He offered a heavy reward for the arrest of Tracy Unwin and John Woodcock, either or both. He started bodies of armed men out in search of the twain, and even joined in the hunt himself, despite the serious condition of his bullet-marked hand.

This he was forced to submit to the inspection of "Doc" Masters, who was first sobered off by a thorough drenching in a sluice-box. The wound was dressed, and the gambler given to understand that the quieter he remained the mere chance he had of saving that important member.

"I'll save it if you'll let me, Jay," frankly said the doctor, as he pocketed his first fee. "But I won't fight whisky and the hurt both. Let the festive glass have a rest, or turn it over to me. And keep your brain cool. Let the boys racket about after this Timber Doodle. Time enough for you when they fetch him into camp at the end of a trail-rope."

Jay Dillon gave no positive pledge, but the doctor was satisfied. He had given warning, and if that warning was not attended to, no man could fling blame in his teeth. And he had money to pay for more bad whisky!

When the whisky-wreck passed from view, a harsh laugh curled the lips of the tall card-sharp. It was easy to preserve rest and quietude, but how could he observe either, with his bold game going so desperately to pieces? With all his painfully arranged plans falling into ruin on every hand? With worse than defeat staring him in the face?

"I've got to shuffle for a new deal, and if I can't stock the papers to suit my book, then the quicker I hunt another climate the better my health will be!" he muttered with a vicious frown as he nursed his bandaged hand. "I've got to come out on top! I've gone too far to turn back or even halt by the way! That ice-blooded demon knows more than he would tell up yonder—knows far too much for my neck! But how did he do it? And why?"

No matter what course he sent his thoughts, they ever returned to that strange vanishment.

With feverish impatience Jay Dillon waited for the return of Garl Megilp, his first messenger sent to carry word of warning to Steel-face that their long-considered game was opened prematurely by the other side. He hardly dared hope that his courier would find Lee Facer nearer than Silver City, at best, though it was barely possible fortune might smile sufficiently to make partial amends for her frowns.

"If not—will he be in time to check those two?" frowning darkly as he recalled what Tracy Unwin had testified at the Lone Cabin. "It nearly tumbled me over when old Jones let out his intention of sending for his kids; but when the other came—a million curses on the hand that foiled my plans!"

Jay Dillon waited and watched in vain for the coming of Garl Megilp, that worthy, as we have seen, being bent on proving an effectual *alibi* if a row was kicked up over the vanishment of Howard Carter. And while his master was cursing his tardiness, Garl Megilp was snoring off his drunken stupor in one corner of Dimple Dick's saloon.

All that day no word came to Jay Dillon, and fearing the worst, his brain was busily mapping out a scheme in which he took no account of Lee Facer, when at dusk a man rode into Top Notch, quietly seeking an interview with the tall gambler.

Never mind what passed between them. Enough to state that the rider came from Steel-face, having been started from Gold Hills at day-dawn following the successful kidnapping of the nifty little dude.

For a long time Jay Dillon sat in silence, pondering deeply, trying to see the surest way

through the tangle into which his elaborately sketched plans had so unexpectedly fallen. If this word had come to him a little earlier—or if Steel-face had not been so infernally guarded in his message!

The messenger could give him but scant satisfaction on the point that troubled him most. Steel-face had told him nothing beyond bidding him carry a letter in hot haste to Top Notch. He had no time to fully understand the cause of excitement in Gold Hills, though he did learn that some young fellow had strangely disappeared during the past night.

Time was by far too precious for delay. Jay Dillon dared not go to Gold Hills himself, with both Tracy Unwin and Pistol Johnny at large. Already they more than suspected him, and such a move, with what must follow, would almost surely convict him in other eyes than theirs.

The plot which he had partially formed, discussing with Pitt Bynight and a couple of equally trusty men, while out in the hills that afternoon, must be carried out; and so deciding, Jay Dillon wrote a note and sent Tom Dickory with it to Gold Hills.

There was time enough and to spare, provided Pistol Johnny did not "get in his work" during the interval. That had to be risked, and even if the atrociously Cool Hand should endeavor to pluck victory out of the fire by stealing across country to intercept the Carters, he would have Steel-face to deal with.

"I almost wish he would try it on!" with a vicious showing of white teeth and wolfish glittering in jetty eyes. "Steel-face has got my double warning, and even Pistol Johnny has no license to fool with him! I only wish he'd try it on—and Unwin with him!"

Nothing was heard of the fugitives, though one of the little bands of searchers remained out until midnight, hoping to strike their camp-fire. This was the party under lead of Pitt Bynight, who burned to avenge the death of his bosom pard, Hod Geary.

With the first gleam of dawn their search was resumed, and Jay Dillon left Top Notch in their company, despite the sober warning of his physician, who was called to renew the dressing of his wound.

"You'll keep on the move until I'll have to whack that paw off above the joint, confound you!" he growled, sourly. "For little I'd give you a dose to flatten you on your back for a week!"

When safe from eavesdropping, Jay Dillon called his party to a halt, and told them something of the tidings which came from Steel-face at Gold Hills. He was too shrewd a gamester to reveal his every card when less would serve. He mentioned no names, said naught about the actual stake for which he was playing, but told ample to satisfy the tough cases who acknowledged him as master for the time being.

"We've done it afore this, an' I reckon we kin do it some more," grimly laughed Pitt Bynight. "It'll do Tansy Dick heap good, anyway! When the durned limber-lipped critter come in an' hearn tell how a sharp like Pistol Johnny played us all fer suckers, he nigh leaped out o' his ole rags. An' he told over twenty times I do reckon, how his ole side-pardner, as he called the pizen critter, played circus up Tight Squeeze way. Durn his yawp, anyway! Ef he opens his head when we jump his ole hearse, I'll open a drift clean through it!"

"No you won't, Pitt," coldly, as he started to leave them. "What I've planned will kick up big enough bobbery without any blood-letting, keep that in mind, will you?"

"Then I'll lick the durned yawper the fu'st time I ketch him in reach, after the trick he turned!" growled the swarthy giant.

"That's outside of my job, and your own lookout," laughed Jay Dillon as he parted company with the little squad, leaving them to search the hills and valleys for Pistol Johnny and his *protege*.

That same day Jay Dillon paid another visit to the Lone Cabin, with a neat little body-guard in case aught should be seen of the two men on whose heads he had set a price. With their aid he again searched the ground round about the cabin, trying to solve the mystery of that enigmatical body-snatching. But he had his pains for naught. The red, spidery letters remained on the floor, but that was all to tell of the dark tragedy which those silent walls had witnessed.

With the coming of evening, the card-sharp returned to Top Notch, worn and weary, looking more fit for bed than aught else.

He sent for Doctor Masters, who viewed his patient with drunken gravity before speaking.

"Write down your last bequests, and I'll see that they are carried out," he finally grunted, with a sniff of utter disgust.

"I begin to think that maybe you're further up in medicine than I am," faintly smiled Jay Dillon. "I hate to jump a game before it is fairly ended, and this one in particular. The murder of Jones places me in a mighty delicate box, unless I can bring his killer to light beyond the possibility of a doubt, and—"

"You're posting right where you can get the

information from headquarters!" bluntly interjected the physician. "Keep up your present lick, and inside of two days you can ask Jones himself!"

"So bad as that?" with a slight start and paling.

"Just so bad as that!" was the emphatic retort.

"Then I must trust to the boys to put the game through!"

"You've got to keep quiet. You've got to rest, mind and body, or we'll be holding a wake over your carcass—sure's you're a foot high!" positively if inelegantly declared the doctor.

"Then give me a dose that will hold me on my back for—say dark to-morrow. Can you do it?"

"Why not? But will you stick it out?"

"Give me the dose. Tuck me up in my little bed, then lock the door and throw away the key, if you can't think of any better way."

This with a laugh, but it seemed as though Jay Dillon really meant what he said, after all. He told the doctor to put a trusty man on guard before his door, with orders to permit no one to pass, no matter what occurred.

This was actually carried out, and before he drank himself blind drunk with the money supplied him by Jay Dillon, Dr. Masters spread the story all through camp. And all that night, all the next day, an armed man stood on guard over the premises.

Not over Jay Dillon, though!

Along in the small hours of that night, the guard opened the door with the key intrusted to him by the doctor, and permitted a muffled figure to steal forth in the gloom. He closed the door, locked it and slipped the key into his pocket, looking after the retreating shape with a grim chuckle before resuming his guard-duty.

"Takes the boss fer to rig up a *halibi*!" he chuckled in his beard. "I kin take oath they hain't nobody went in nur yit come out o' this 'ere shebang sense the Doc shet 'er up tight!"

And while many a curious glance was cast toward the guarded house by citizens of Top Notch, the supposed inmate was out in the open air, ready to make another bold play in his desperate game for the Last Hope.

Not alone. Pitt Bynight and half a dozen other stout rascals were of the party, taking matters quite easily not many rods away from where the stage road wound its way through the broken ground.

The swarthy giant had sworn in public to stick to the job until he had run down the Cool Hand whose unerring pistol laid his partner low in death. And as he had kept on the move pretty much all the time since Pistol Johnny ran the gantlet out of Top Notch, he and his comrades would hardly be suspected of the deed in contemplation. They were supposed to be still searching for some trace of the fugitives. That would be *alibi* sufficient for their purposes.

Jay Dillon, disguised with false beard, in a rough, clay-stained suit of clothes and heavy boots that made him seem full fifty pounds heavier than usual, had removed the black mask with which the upper portion of his face was to be disguised.

He was very pale, and there was a sunken, haggard look about his eyes that told his wound, added to this constant strain, was bearing hard upon his reserve forces. Graver than ever would Doctor Masters have looked, could he have seen his patient just then.

The bandaged hand was supported by a sling for the present, but when the time for action came, Dillon was prepared to disguise even the fact of his being crippled; a false stump to show outwardly, while his helpless hand and arm were to be hidden inside his loose garments.

He was talking the matter over, his men listening with no little interest, since up to this moment they had known nothing more definite than that they were to act as road-agents, and to "hold up" the stage from Gold Hills.

"You don't want to make any mistake, boys. I'll take the lead, and you'll play to my signals. It's not likely there'll be any pilgrims aboard with grit enough to show fight. If there is—"

Jay Dillon stopped short, an ugly light leaping into his eyes as he veiled them with their lids. A horrible temptation flashed across his brain, making it reel and whirl until a blood-red mist blotted out his sight for an instant.

The roughs waited in silence for him to complete his sentence, not even Pitt Bynight caring to interrupt him by asking a question. Never a good man to cross by word or deed, the events of the past few days had not improved the temper of the card-sharp.

With an effort, Jay Dillon banished that mad whirl, and lifted his lids, casting a swift, suspicious glance over the faces of his rascals.

He saw nothing worse than a lazy curiosity imprinted there, and drew a long breath of relief—from pain, as he suggested by the manner in which he readjusted his crippled hand in its sling.

"Where was I?" he muttered, showing his teeth through the mask of grizzled hair. "Curse the hand that rapped my knuckles!"

with a vicious snarl. "The pain drives me almost wild, at times!"

"Double cuss him I say!" growled Pitt Bynight.

"When this job's well over, I'll set to work in dead earnest and never let up until I've wiped off all scores! But as I started to say: Not one of you will burn powder without I make a break. I don't want to kick up any bigger rumpus than I have to, but there'll be a couple of passengers in the hearse who mustn't pass this spot of their own free will. I prefer them alive if we can rake 'em in that way; but I want 'em bad!"

"Then they're good as yours, boss!"

"I think so myself, but one can't always tell. We'll call a halt on Tansy Dick, and he'll pull up lively enough. He's been there before, and knows too much to make a foolish break, just for manners. Then, if no hot-head tries to waste his powder—"

"Tain't likely, but ef they should?" ventured Pitt Bynight as his master again broke off short.

"Then I'll try the best I know to get ahead of them!"

"An' we-uns, boss?"

"Turn the hearse into one for a cold fact!" came the hard, harsh response. "Riddle it from stem to stern if you like!"

"An' I kin salivate Tansy?" grinned the swarthy giant, showing his teeth in a murderous grin.

Jay Dillon hesitated for a brief space, his pupils contracting, his white forehead lining deeply. He seemed considering the point, and it was quite a space before he replied:

"I reckon not, this time, Pitt. You mustn't do it. There's no danger the old fellow will spot any one of us in this ring, and his evidence in camp will be worth more than his life to us. No!" with sudden emphasis. "If anything of the sort should occur—which isn't at all likely, you understand!—Tansy must go scott-free."

There was no appeal from this decision, though Pitt Bynight looked as though he would like to make one, had he dared. But, ever a little in awe of this man whom he served in evil, the change for the worse which marked Jay Dillon ever since he brought tidings of the tragedy at the Lone Cabin, held the Indian-like desperado in meek submission.

"It's mighty nigh time fer ole Tansy to be moggin' along, ain't it?" ventured one of the disguised party, with a squint toward the rapidly declining sun. "Be our luck ef he was behind his schedule!"

"This is plenty good waitin' fer me," lazily drawled another, lying on the broad of his back, with hat slouched over his eyes.

Just then there came floating on the favoring breeze the peculiar note of the great horned owl, far more of a daylight bird than most persons seem to be aware of.

"Tu-whit—tu-whit—tu-whit—tu-whoo-ah-h-h!"

The call died away in a strange, moaning gurgle that cannot be adequately expressed through the medium of type, the whole being an imitation so perfect that any one not looking for just such a signal, would never have suspected it came from a human throat. But Jay Dillon sprang to his feet and hurriedly began adjusting his crippled hand, as he exclaimed:

"Tansy Dick is coming! That's Menagerie Pete's call! Ready and to your stations! See that your tools are in perfect order, and remember the instructions I gave you: not a shot unless I burn powder first, or some hot-head from the hearse tries a pot-shot!"

Instantly all was bustle, though with little show of confusion. The men acted as though they had performed much the same play before, as doubtless many of them had.

Each man looked to his pistols, lifting the hammers and twirling the cylinders around to see if all was free for rapid work.

By the time Jay Dillon secured his crippled hand and arm inside his loose flannel shirt, the false stump dangling with a life-like appearance, the sentinel came gliding up, grinning broadly as he said:

"Ketched sight o' the hearse crossin' Hog-back, an' Tansy Dick lettin' his critters out as though he wanted to *git thar* in heap hurry!"

"Then there's little time to lose. Rig out, Pete, and fall in with the rest. No time to give you instructions, but you can copy after the rest. Follow Pitt, and you'll not be far out!" hurriedly uttered Jay Dillon, seeming far less cool than any of the party had ever seen him before that day, though this was not their first bold crime with him at their head.

Possibly it was because of that sudden change of purpose, to which allusion has been made.

Rapidly, cautiously, the road-agents made their way to the trail, crouching down on each side of the road, under good cover. And scarcely had they accomplished this than the stage came rumbling and rattling over the rocky road at a brisk trot, with Tansy Dick filling the seat.

Just before the lead horses reached a point opposite where the ambush was placed, Jay Dillon, unrecognizable in his disguise, leaped out in front of the horses, flinging up his armed hand, crying sharply:

"Down brakes, driver! Steady, all! or chaw cold lead!"

"Down she am, boss!" promptly cried the driver, flinging his weight on the brake-bar and jerking back on the ribbons.

"Hold her level, then!"

"Level goes, boss!" with equal promptitude, as the rest of the gang rose from cover, adding their ugly armament to the argument thrust forward by their chief. "But ef you—"

"Button up, durn ye!" growled Dillon, covering the man with his ready left hand. "Act, not talk! Riddle him, lads, ef he opens trap ag'in afore I say so! Hold the hearse kivered while I—"

As he spoke, Jay Dillon moved around the snorting, frightened lead-horses, making for the door of the stage, pistol ready for instant use, either as a terrorizer or in dead earnest.

He cut himself short as he gained a glimpse of the open window, for through it he saw the muzzle of a rifle protruding—behind this a glimpse of a man's face!

Ducking low to the ground, the chief sent a bullet through the window, calling out sharply:

"Riddle the hearse, lads!"

Tansy Dick uttered a sharp cry as he saw the masked man fire a shot, and in agitated, excited tones he yelled:

"Don't shoot! he cain't do no—"

The rest was drowned in a rattle of exploding pistols, as the gang divided and sprang to either side, where they could riddle the coach with a rapid cross-fire, not one of the party paying heed to the excited driver, who fairly howled with wild dismay at the horrible scene.

Not a sound came from the coach as the pistols ceased to vomit forth fire and lead, and Jay Dillon sprang to the door, to start back with a wild cry and vicious curse!

CHAPTER XV.

A LATTER-DAY CLAUDE DUVAL.

ON the evening after the fortunate discovery and rescue of Howard Carter by his now devoted friend, Lee Facer, there was a consultation in the "parlor" of the Ten Stamp Hotel, which resulted in a decision to take the stage for Top Notch in the morning.

Mr. Facer strongly advised against this, at first, and yielding gracefully only when both brother and sister showed him that they were not to be moved from the position they had taken. Knowing what we do know, it is more than likely that Steel-face would have been less persistent if he had not seen how thoroughly in earnest the young couple were on their part.

"You know not what danger you may be running headlong into," he gravely, anxiously uttered. "Though you know not your enemies, what has happened to each of you since your coming to Gold Hills is ample proof that you have enemies, unscrupulous, audacious, as ready to execute as they are to plan."

"We'll leave our troubles behind us when we shake the dust of Gold Hills off our feet," laughed Howard, more than half in earnest.

"What would you advise, Mr. Facer?" asked Mabel, gently, feeling a great reluctance to go against the advice of this kind and courageous friend whom a pitying Providence had raised up for them in their hour of great need.

"Waiting here until your father or Tracy Unwin comes. Surely they cannot be much longer! Your letters must have reached them!"

"We will wait until the stage rolls out in the morning," decided Howard, a shadow coming into his face at that allusion; for he deeply regretted the sending of those notes; and the one to Anson Carter in particular.

Even then Steel-face did not entirely yield the position he had taken, and one who did not know how viciously he had worked against the young couple who believed him devoted to their best interests, would have thought him almost foolishly earnest in his arguments.

The argument was still in progress when the rattle of wheels from the northwest proclaimed the arrival of the stage on its return trip from Top Notch, and leaving the maiden to wait in trembling between hope and fear, the two men hastened forth to see if any passengers had arrived in whom they took an interest.

A few moments later Howard returned to his sister, shaking his head in silence. Neither Anson Carter nor Tracy Unwin were there.

With sudden tenderness, the actual cause of which the poor girl never suspected, Howard Carter induced his sister to go to her own chamber, where he brought her her evening meal, lingering until she was preparing for bed, though his heart was wildly anxious to learn all the truth of that wild story which Tansy Dick brought to Gold Hills.

There was time enough, after all. Gold Hills had nothing of more importance to discuss, and the "circus" at Top Notch kept all tongues busy while their owners kept astir.

Tansy Dick was almost beside himself as he spoke of Pistol Johnny, and the cool manner in which he had played with the bad men of Top Notch.

"Didn't I see him do pritty nigh the same way up Tight Squeeze? Didn't I freeze to him then, tighter'n a wood-tick to a fat dorgy? Didn't I throw up my persish an' set off to hunt him up,

jes' so I could do his crowin' when he felt too lazy fer doin' of it him own self? And didn't I s'arch the hull durned kentry from stem to starn 'thout even gittin' on his track ontel the oro failed me an' I hed to tackle this job? Didn't I? An' won't I? When the boss cleans 'em all out—an' I kin claw up the critter as is fool 'nough fer to even think Jack o' the Double-six cain't an' won't do it! When he—durn my cats—gi' me a ball fer to open up my thrapple wider—I'm bu'stin' wide open!"

Fortunately there were passengers from Top Notch who could give a clearer account of the happenings at that town, and from them Howard Carter learned all that was openly known concerning the fate of Thompson Jones. And, though in his hasty note of information Tracy Unwin had not been quite as explicit as he might have been, perhaps, Howard now felt assured that this Thompson Jones was really his father.

After this news, even Lee Facer seemed to feel that further opposition to their hasty journey to Top Notch would be worse than useless. And after a serious consultation, it was decided to keep the alarming tidings from Mabel as long as possible.

Steel-face volunteered to see to this matter, and as all Gold Hills had taken an intense interest in the young lady whose experience in their midst had been so curious, this was not a difficult matter to arrange. Indeed, several of the gallant hot-bloods of town constituted themselves a guard over the hotel, vowing to turn toes-up any and every scoundrel who dared to so much as wink about the affair within a dozen rods of the lady's resting place.

Early in the morning our friends were astir, eating an ample meal before taking the stage for Top Notch. Mabel was all excitement, all a blush and tremble, her great eyes fairly filled with happy anticipations. Not a ray of the sad rumor had reached her as yet, and she had nothing to keep her from thinking—thinking of the end of her long journey, and of the sweet reward which surely awaited her coming!

The honorary guard were still on duty, scowling ferociously at every citizen who ventured within speaking range of the stage drawn up before the Ten Stamp Hotel. Tansy Dick was sober as a deacon, though he keenly eyed the lady as she came down the hotel steps and entered the coach. Ebenezer Flick was hopping about like a round pea on a hot gridle, too greatly flustered to feel his customary awe of Lee Facer. And just as the stage was about to roll away, he came tumbling down the steps to thrust a repeating-rifle in at the window, gasping:

"Take it—shoot—good Lawd!"

Sharply cracked the knotted silk, and away the four good horses dashed, leaving Ebenezer Flick sprawling in the dust before his own door, tripped up by his own fatness in trying to escape worse injury.

"What did he say?" half-laughed Mabel, looking back to assure herself that the honest old fellow had received no serious injury. "Shoot whom—what?"

"Your enemies, I imagine," responded Steel-face, with a low, soft laugh as he looked the weapon over, then made as though he would cast it out through the window.

But Howard Carter caught his arm, taking the rifle and looking it over with the air of one not wholly unfamiliar with its uses.

"It won't come amiss, mayhap," he said, with a half-smile on his lips, but with a swift gleam in his eyes that spoke far more sincerely. "If we have no use for it, we can send it back to the old fellow."

A shade crept over the cold face of their companion, and his hand covertly gave Howard a grip of warning as he caught his eye.

"That's all right, Mr. Facer," bluntly uttered the young man, the glow deepening in his eyes. "But Mabel is my sister, and though we're neither of us very ferocious-looking, we've got too much Yankee grit and pluck to tamely submit to robbery, even by your famous road-agents. How a coach-full of armed men can meekly submit to be robbed of their valuables by half a dozen—by two, and even a single rascal, is more than I can understand."

"May you never have a chance to learn through actual experience, my dear fellow," with a faint smile, his eyes full of earnest solicitude. "As for why we submit—let me give you a hint."

"Road-agents jump you just when least expected. They get the drop before you suspect danger. And while they will not harm a hair of your head if you submit, no men in the world can shoot quicker or surer than they if actual resistance be offered. Better to lose a few dollars than lose life, isn't it?"

"I hold it's better to lose neither," bluntly.

"Suppose we should be held up—which is very improbable, to say the least, since nothing of the sort has taken place for years in this neighborhood. But suppose we *should* be, and you were to attempt to carry out your threats; what would be the first move on the other side?"

"Simply a cross-fire, that would turn this coach into a sieve! And with a lady in the case—no, no, my dear fellow!" with grave deci-

sion. "If anything of the sort should turn up, I'd deem it a sacred duty to Miss Carter to disarm you myself!"

There was some further conversation on this point while the coach rolled briskly on toward Top Notch, but enough has been recorded to serve our purpose. Knowing as he did that Jay Dillon and his gang were planning to stop the stage and abduct the heirs to the Last Hope, Steel-face was cunningly paving the way for his own immunity.

Past experience told him that Howard Carter was by no means a coward, or an adversary to be despised, slight and effeminate though he was and looked. If permitted to have his own way, he might seriously disturb the smooth working of their dangerous schemes.

Enough that by showing the peril which would necessarily have to be shared by Mabel, in such an emergency, Steel-face gained Howard's promise to make no fight in case of being stopped by road-agents. And then laughed heartily at the ridiculous idea.

"Those days are past and gone, thank fortune!" he laughed. "Our latter-day Dick Turpins have sought other and safer methods of raising the wind, or else migrated to still more heathenish regions."

It was a long and weary stage to Top Notch, and when the hour of noon came, Tansy Dick turned out of the trail for the purpose of baiting his team, as usual. And at the same time the trio of passengers spread the lunch provided them by Mrs. Flick, beside a cool spring.

An hour was spent after this fashion, then Tansy Dick again bowed along toward Top Notch, chuckling and grinning as he went over in imagination the scenes in which his idol, Pistol Johnny, had played such a prominent part.

"An' to think that he should come right here, whar I'm stuck fer lack o' ducats to hunt any furdur! An' me lookin' fer him pritty nigh all over creation! Fer what? Fer why?"

"Beca'se life ain't wuth livin' whar they ain't no sech as him! Beca'se he hit the ole man right whar he lives! I hain't got chick nur child. They ain't a 'lation livin' in this world, so fur's I know. My schedule's pritty nigh clared off, an' my runnin'-gear gittin' mighty shackly. It'll go bu'st all of a hurry, one o' these long-come-shortly. Then why cain't the ole man hev—Hello!"

"Sorry, but can't be helped, pardner!" cried a voice as a footman suddenly stepped into the narrow trail, covering the startled driver with a cocked revolver that looked atrociously like business. "Down brakes and hold her level, won't you?"

Mechanically Tansy Dick flung his weight on the brake-bar and pulled hard on the ribbons, his lower jaw dropping, his little eyes increasing in size and threatening to pop out of their sockets as he stared at the bold road-agent.

"Steady inside, there!" his voice taking on a sharper echo as he sprung a little to one side, the better to cover the open window. "I don't want to hurt you tenderfeet, but if I *have* to—cover the old hearse, lads, and let blizzer for keeps if they cut up rusty!"

Startled exclamations and sudden movements inside the stage called forth this sharp menace, but closely following it came a clear, earnest appeal from the interior:

"There's a lady inside—let her get out if you're bound to add butchery to theft!"

"Bless her pretty eyes! Such as they always bring luck with them, and I doff my hat to madam!" laughed the road-agent, though he still kept the window covered with his weapons.

Tansy Dick, white as his liberal coating of tan would permit, was still staring at the speaker, his face curiously working, his fingers twitching, his eyes filled with a strange mingling of joy and amazement. And as the road-agent moved along the side of the coach, Tansy Dick twisted in his seat the better to follow that strangely familiar form.

"Hands empty, remember, my gentle pilgrims," added the road-agent, nearing the door of the stage, his pistol ready for instant use in case any resistance should be offered. "I don't want to hurt you. I'd almost rather lose the toll I've come to collect. But business is business, and I'm its right bower!"

"Take our valuables, if you must, but respect a lady," coldly uttered Howard Carter, turning the catch and flinging the door open as he uttered the words.

"Both of which I'll cheerfully carry out, my gentle stranger! Glad to see you are so wise, and only wish there were more of your particular kidney in this melancholy wilderness! It comes like a shower in the desert. For, as a rule, where we don't reap kicks, we are just smothered under an avalanche of curses, spiced with groans and wailings and gnashing of teeth!"

"You might get still worse, only for the fact of a lady being in that box," growled Steel-face, stepping from the coach, his face pale as that of a corpse, a curiously uneasy glitter in his eyes as they scanned the road-agent from top to toe.

There was little to be seen by which he could form an opinion, for the face was covered by a loose, yet impenetrable handkerchief; the form

was clad in rough, ill-fitting garments such as any digger might wear. Only the height, under rather than over the average, and the fact that he was slender in make, could be ascertained.

"Keep an eye on him, pardner, while I assist the lady to 'light," called out the road-agent, and Steel-face turned quickly to confront the tall figure that stepped forward in prompt obedience.

Yet, with a strange lack of caution in a man running such risks, this second road-agent was gazing into the stage, rather than at his charge, and his pistol was hanging idly at his side.

Steel-face swiftly glanced at him, from head to foot, then looked around as though in expectation of beholding still others. In vain. So far as he could see only these two men were engaged in the outrage.

As Mabel Carter showed her pale, beautiful face at the door of the stage, this tall man uttered a low, gasping cry, and instantly the terrible truth flashed upon Steel-face.

Swift as thought he whipped forth a revolver and at the same time sprang to one side out of reach of the second outlaw. He covered the form by the stage—but before he could fire, Tansy Dick whirled the long lash of his whip through the air, wrapping around the weapon and tearing it from the grip of Steel-face!

"Look out, pardner!" squealed the driver, fairly wild with excitement as he ducked his head to avoid the bullet that whistled past his ear from the deftly-stolen weapon.

With an angry snarl, the road-agent whirled and leaped at the throat of Steel-face, hurling him to the ground with a stunning shock. His sinewy fingers closed about his throat. His knees pinned both arms to the ground, and almost before he could realize his failure, Steel-face was helpless.

At the same instant the tall road-agent sprang to the door of the stage, tearing the mask from his face as Mabel shrunk back with a cry of terror.

"Mabel—my precious! Do you not know me?"

"You—and in *this* guise!" ejaculated Howard Carter, with pistol half-drawn from its resting-place. "What does it all mean, anyway? Who is that rascal? Call him off, or I'll blow a hole through him, too—"

Tansy Dick heard all this, then closed his eyes and began to sing in anything but a musical voice, determined not to see or hear too much just then.

"I'll explain all, Howard, and prove to you that yonder devil has betrayed you from first to last," hurriedly explained Tracy Unwin, as he held the trembling, bewildered maiden close-locked in his arms. "We *had* to take this course, as the only hope of saving your lives from—"

"Go slow, pard!" came a warning voice, as Pistol Johnny rose from his insensible antagonist. "This cunning devil may be playing 'possum, though I hardly think it. Anyhow, yonder driver has ears—"

"No he hain't, nuther," exploded Tansy Dick, grinning until it seemed his head must part in equal divisions under the expansive strain. "He cain't see nur hear nothin'! He don't *want* to! Only—ef you could make time fer to grip my paw fer jest a second."

Pistol Johnny reached up and caught the trembling hand, pressing it until the bones snapped, at the same time uttering:

"Shake she am, stranger! But not fur old time's rocks, mind you! You never saw me before. You never saw *this* man before. You haven't the ghost of an idea who we are or whence we came. Now have you?"

"Hope may die thirsty if I hev, pard," grinned Tansy Dick.

"There's a round dozen of us, as you can see, and the leader of the gang was built something like Jay Dillon, of Top Notch. You couldn't swear it *was* him, but the shape and all that was there!"

"Bet she am, pard!"

Pistol Johnny dropped back from the hub, and busied himself with Steel-face, leaving Tracy Unwin to explain the reason for their curious conduct as best he might.

The ice-blooded sport was beginning to recover from that terrible choking, but before he could even think of resistance, Pistol Johnny dragged him into the stage, and bound him securely to the rear seat, forcing his jaws open and thrusting a stiff gag between them, binding a white handkerchief over Steel-face's lips, knotting the ends firmly behind his neck. Then, with a low chuckle of grim amusement, he tied the rifle supplied by Ebenezer Flick to the shoulder of the captive, resting the muzzle on the ledge of the lowered window in the door.

Stepping out at the other side, Pistol Johnny closed the door, then gave Tansy Dick a warning wink as he cried out, in harsh, ugly tones:

"Swear that you'll not draw rein or leave your seat for a second until you roll into Top Notch! Swear by heaven and earth, or off goes the whole top of your head!"

"Don't shoot," quavered Tansy Dick, grinning all the while. "I'll do it—hope to die ef I don't now."

"Then pull out, and keep a close tongue be-

tween your teeth, or we'll drop you from the box on your next trip!"

Without a word, Tansy sprung back the brake, slackened the ribbons, and sent his horses forward, little thinking what he was carrying his solitary passenger to meet!

CHAPTER XVI.

PISTOL JOHNNY'S PERSUASIVE WAY.

JAY DILLON staggered back from the open window of the coach, with a harsh, grating cry of mingled horror and baffled rage.

Staring straight at him were those stony eyes, seemingly unmoved by the bullet which a treacherous hand had sent crashing through the busy brain which had plotted so steadily for both—the eyes of Lee Facer!

"They've got the boss! Jump 'em fer keeps, boys!" cried Pitt Bynight, misinterpreting that falling back, for a moment believing that at least one shot must have come from the coach, and hit their chief hard.

Dropping his empty pistol, flashing forth a wicked knife, the Indian-like giant leaped forward, tearing open the door on the side opposite that through which Jay Dillon had sent the first shot. Tore it open, to stop short in open-jawed amazement.

Only one passenger—and he a man! What did it mean?

Then he caught sight of the bonds with which the dead schemer was still held on the seat—caught sight of his face, and through the growing mask of blood recognized its owner.

"Steel-face!"

With wondering cries the road-agents crowded around the bullet-scarred stage, staring, wondering, bewildered, for the time being forgetting those keen eyes and shrewd wits on the box-seat above them.

But Tansy Dick was no fool. Life had suddenly increased in value since the coming of Pistol Johnny to Top Notch, and the veteran stared stiffly over the ears of his leaders, seeing, hearing nothing, as he was ready to make oath.

Jay Dillon was the first of the gang to recover at least a portion of his wonted coolness, and a warning curse hissed in the ears of his fellows. A short nod toward Tansy Dick emphasized his meaning, and the ruffians fell into silence.

"Two of you fellows look after the horses," sternly uttered the chief, adding as his order was promptly obeyed: "Now we'll hear from you, old fellow. What sort of cargo is this you're toting, anyway? Who trussed him up after this fashion? What for? Curses blister you from crown to sole! Speak out!"

In truly doleful tones Tansy Dick obeyed.

He told of the little company with which he pulled out of Gold Hills, and of the attack by road-agents, who had carried off two of the three passengers, leaving him to carry the other back to Top Notch.

"Who were they?"

"I'll never tell ye, boss," almost whimpered Tansy. "They was too big a heap fer jest one man to count—an' him with the ribbons!"

"Look out, you whining villain!" snarled Jay Dillon, his left hand rising until the pistol which had sent death to Steel-face, stared the driver full in the eyes. "You're trying to lie. There were only two of the demons—and one of them was you!"

Jay Dillon cut himself short, feeling that he was letting his mad disappointment carry himself too far. It was an ugly botch at the best, but it might turn out even worse were he to accuse Pistol Johnny, after the trouble he had already had with that Cool Hand.

He felt sure that Tansy Dick was lying to him, indirectly if not worse. He felt positive that only Pistol Johnny and Tracy Unwin would have taken all this trouble. Who else would care to incur themselves with a man and a woman—who else would have bound and gagged Steel-face, sending him to meet his fellow-schemers after this fashion?

During those few moments the life of Tansy Dick hung by a thread as frail as ever spider spun. The veteran seemed to realize this, but he did not lose his nerve.

"They done it, an' then made me take oath that I wouldn't pull ribbons or tetch brake afore I rolled into Top Notch. I had to take it, boss! They swore I'd lose the hull top o' my head ef I didn't!"

"Why didn't you sing out and tell us—"

"Didn't I try to? Didn't I start at a 'lope, an' didn't you shot me up fer keeps?"

Jay Dillon turned away with a vicious growl, for now he recalled the words so excitedly called out by Tansy Dick just before his shot. The driver could not be blamed, on the surface, at least.

Together he consulted with several of his men, and Tansy Dick felt cold shivers running up and down his spinal column as he awaited the result. In his estimation it was a toss-up whether or no he ever left that spot alive.

Shortly after, the masked chief turned back, speaking sharply:

"You say you took an oath back yonder, and kept it to the death of your passenger. If you can take another and keep it just as true, I'll let you finish your trip. What do you say?"

"I'll take a dozen, boss, ef you say so," was the meek response.

"One will fill the bill. Swear that you'll tool the old hearse right into Top Notch without touching this stiff. Swear that you'll let all Top Notch see what you carry, and how he's rigged out. And tell all who ask, that the first gang trussed him up after this style. Think you can do it?"

"I kin, ef I must, boss," with a half-shiver, as he cast a furtive glance toward that ghastly sight. "I kin ef you say so. But ef I might kinder ease him down on the seat, a bit, why—"

"I've told you the price of your worthless life!" with vicious emphasis. "Take the oath or—"

The sentence was not completed in words, but the cold muzzle of a cocked revolver pressed against the temple of the veteran.

"It's fer you to say, boss," meekly. "I'll swear to do jest as you bid me—to never tetch or alter nothin' atween this an' town!"

Jay Dillon hesitated for a moment, tempted to say more, but concluded to risk nothing. Any request on his part to say little about this party, might sharpen the suspicions of Tansy Dick until he could point them out, despite their elaborate disguises.

"Climb back on the box, then, and bear in mind that if you step aside from the trail I've lined for you, even an inch, you'll pay the penalty, even if I have to come back from the end of the world to collect my duel! You sabe?"

"Sabe she am, boss!"

"Up with you, then, Tansy, and make the best time you can into Top Notch. Tell a straight story for once. Not that we're so terribly tender skinned, but we've got sins enough of our own to father, without being cursed for the work of other hawks!"

While Jay Dillon was keeping Tansy Dick in play, Pitt Bynight and his fellows were not altogether idle. They cut the harness in a score places, not entirely disabling the team, but so as to seriously delay the driver, knowing how important it was that they should beat him into Top Notch, to perfect their *alibi* should suspicion ever turn in their direction.

A single glance showed Tansy Dick all that had been done as he climbed back to his seat, but he dared not make any outcry just then. The road-agents were moving back under cover, and though he suspected their purpose, he was by no means certain that one or more of their number would not linger behind to punish him in case he should attempt to abandon the stage with its ghastly lading. And so, as briskly as he could, he fell to work patching up the harness to make it complete his run.

It was after dusk when Jay Dillon reached Top Notch, and he kept along the darkest side of the street, staggering and grumbling like one pretty well filled up with "red liquor," his crippled hand still disguised by that false stump, his handsome face daubed with grime where it was not masked by that grizzly beard.

He met one or two persons passing along, but none who spoke to or even gave him a second glance, until he came to his own premises, where the guard was still holding his own. A muttered signal, and then he was safely under cover, while his guard strolled off to hunt up Dr. Masters.

Jay Dillon removed and concealed the disguise he had worn, then tumbled his bed and waited for the physician, knowing that his hand must be attended to with scant delay.

Half drunk though he was, Dr. Masters looked very grave as he removed the dressing and exposed the wound. He had counted on a great improvement after that enforced rest, but instead he found the injury far worse than ever.

"You drink too much bad whisky, Jay," with an owl's shake of his unkempt head as he fell to work. "You don't show it so much in your face, but the poison's all through your system. Terribly afraid I'll have to whack the pesky thing off, after all!"

"Do it by degrees, then, and begin at my throat," grimly muttered the tall card-sharp, his sunken eyes glowing redly.

He had suffered much during the hours which the doctor supposed were spent in bed, under the influence of a powerful opiate. He showed as much in his haggard, colorless face and his sunken eyes. And Doctor Masters shook his head gravely as he closed the door behind him.

"Whisky does it, I reckon! He'll lose that hand, or he'll fill a high lot on the hillside—and pretty mighty soon, too!"

Alone in the dark sat the baffled plotter, for the time being forgetting the pain of his crippled hand as he thought over what had that day occurred.

He recalled how that frightful temptation assailed and overcame him just before the stage hove in sight. Up to that instant he had not even thought of doing murder. He was playing for the Last Hope, which he knew promised to turn out a big bonanza. He was willing to share this with Steel-face, who had done so much toward winning the game when all seemed lost. Up to that moment!

Until then he had only intended to kidnap Howard and Mabel Carter, holding them secure until his game was won. But then—why not

end all trouble, shielded as he was by his cunning disguise and perfect *alibi*? Why not? It would be only one more red spot on the record drawn up against the road agents!

And then he would not have to divide the prize!

"If I hadn't caught sight of that rifle-muzzle, I don't reckon I'd have gone so far," he muttered, trying at that late hour to deceive himself. "I thought they meant to shoot—and so—I never knew it was *his* face I sighted! Poor devil!"

That was his epitaph!

Moodily, fiercely, despondently, each in its turn, the schemer pondered over the complicated affair, trying in vain to see an open trail before him which might lead to victory.

Gratingly he cursed the Cool Hand who had entered the game just when all was going so well! Just when victory was all but assured! Just when he could work the most serious damage!

He felt positive that Pistol Johnny and Tracy Unwin must be the prime movers in the cunning game played that day. If so, they must have known or strongly suspected his plans. They must have discovered the double part played by Steel-face. If not, would they have sent him on to meet his death, bound so helplessly?

A cautious tapping on the shuttered window broke in upon his gloomy reflections, and as the signal was repeated, Jay Dillon opened the door and gave admittance to Pitt Bynight.

As he did so, he became aware of a growing tumult in town, and for an instant a wild hope flashed into his sunken eyes as he struck a match and lit a lamp. If this only signaled the capture of Pistol Johnny and Tracy Unwin!

"It's Tansy showin' up his freight," growled Pitt Bynight, with a sickly grin on his swarthy face as he dropped into a seat near the table, his hairy hands trembling a little as he poured out a glass of whisky and tossed it off at a gulp. "I showed myself in a saloon or two, like the rest o' the boys, so they couldn't nobody cast a hint at the head o' me; but I pulled out fer this when I see the hearse come rollin' in. I didn't feel like lookin' into *them* eyes, jest now!"

"It was mighty hard luck, but what else could we do?" muttered Dillon, with a slight shiver. "I saw a gun shoved out in my face, and I couldn't stop to see who was behind it—I never thought of poor Lee until it was all over!"

Pitt Bynight made no immediate reply, preferring to devote himself to the whisky. He had his own shrewd suspicions, but he was not fool enough to air them just then or before that face.

He had not been let very deeply into the game, being simply one of the tools which Jay Dillon paid as he used them, but the swarthy desperado had been doing considerable thinking since the tidings came to Top Notch of the murder of Thompson Jones. At odd moments he had busied himself with putting this and that together, until he knew far more than Jay Dillon suspected him of knowing.

While secretly promising himself to have a fair slice of the prize when it was fairly won, Pitt Bynight resolved to keep his own counsel until the right moment came for calling his hand. Then—if his aforetime master attempted to "cut up rusty, they'd be a he-ole circus!"

Jay Dillon had given Pitt Bynight this appointment, feeling the need of some trusty person with whom he could talk over the best plan for their future movements. First in importance, of course, was to find out for certain whether Pistol Johnny had forestalled them in kidnapping the heirs to the Last Hope. If so—what should they do?

It was a complicated case, and even Jay Dillon felt almost in despair as he reviewed it.

"But we can't take water now," he growled, clicking his teeth viciously. "We've got to go straight ahead, or this country isn't big enough to hold us. With that cool demon on our tracks, what show would we have?"

"Not even the ghost of one!" came a clear, laughing reply, and as the two schemers sprung to their feet in amazement, they saw a man just inside the door, covering each with a cocked revolver!

"You demon!"

"Pistol Johnny!"

Simultaneously these cries broke from their lips, and each one told of recognition; it was indeed "The Cool Hand" who held them covered, wholly at his mercy!

"Steady, gentlemen!" came coldly over those polished tubes of death as they covered their shrinking forms. "I don't *want* to add your names to my record, but I'll have to do it unless you are sensible. Keep your fingers away from your guns, or—down you go in a heap!"

"You dare not shoot while the whole camp is astir!"

Pistol Johnny laughed softly, mockingly.

"So Hod Geary thought, but I got him, all the same! And I've got you two gentlemen, just as surely, you want to bear in mind. If you make me play the drop act, I'll get off scot-free, just as I did then. Don't tempt fate, in my clothes, I beg of you!"

So blandly, so quietly, so coolly! Yet the two men who glared savagely into his keen gray

eyes, knew that he meant every syllable that crossed his lips. They knew that this cool sharp had called on stern business, and that he had fully counted the cost before doing so. They knew that if he liked, he could kill them both before a hand could drop to a weapon and they felt morally certain that he would do it, too, unless they quietly submitted to his will.

Yet neither one of the twain was what men call cowardly. Neither one of them but had time and again risked life against odds, and come off victor. Neither of them would have hesitated an instant could they have seen even a ray of hope. As it was, they could only wait and watch for some such opening.

"What do you want, curse you?" grated Jay Dillon, his eyes aglow.

"More than I expect to get this evening, or in this palace," was the light response, in sharp and startling contrast with the words that swiftly followed: "Up with your hands, both! Up, and empty, or I'll blow you through!"

With those weapons covering them so steadily, there was no choice but submission, and Pitt Bynight promptly lifted both hairy paws above his head, while Jay Dillon followed suit with his sound member.

"As you are!" uttered Pistol Johnny, with a short, mocking laugh. "Consider yourself gagged, Jay Dillon. And just keep whispering into your own delicate ear that a blue pill will come searching for what few brains your pate contains, if you utter a whisper loud enough to reach these fly-flappers of mine. And you, half-breed: just take one square look into these peepers of mine and see if you can detect the ghost of joke or foolery there. If not—you'll obey orders without stopping to argue or asking reasons for what you don't thoroughly comprehend. You *sabe*, dark?"

"You've got us foul," was the surly growl.

"And just there I mean to keep you, too, bear in mind. Steady, now!"

Without putting away either of his weapons, Pistol Johnny took a coil of small but strong line from where one end of the coil was tucked under his belt, tossing it upon the table, then saying, in cold and stern accents:

"Take that bit of rope, pardner, but don't allow temptation to send your fingers toward those tools at your hip. And you, Jay Dillon, turn your elegant profile to the north. Turn, you dog!" with sudden viciousness as the gambler hesitated. "Turn before I can count five, or I'll fit you for a wooden overcoat! One, two—so!" as the card-sharp silently obeyed.

Keeping close watch over the giant, Pistol Johnny directed him how to bind the gambler, bringing his arms behind him and connecting both elbows, then binding his left hand tightly to his thigh, leaving the crippled hand at freedom and with the power of bending at the elbow.

"I don't want to hurt you more than I'm absolutely obliged to, Jay Dillon," he said, soberly. "But I'm playing too big a game to run any unnecessary risks, and and you're mighty slippery!"

Still keeping Pitt Bynight covered with a pistol, the Cool Hand tossed him a prepared gag, and forced him to carefully adjust it.

"Now seat him in a chair, and come to Limerick yourself. Black-mug," added Pistol Johnny, blandly, pleasantly as a cat purring in the noonday sunshine.

For one instant it seemed as though Pitt Bynight would revolt, but he thought better of it, in time. That pistol was too business-like. Those gray eyes looked too dangerous, despite the smile which rested on the face of the little sport.

"You're not half so big a fool as you look, Othello," laughed Pistol Johnny, nothing seeming to escape those remarkable eyes. "Keep on acting as sensibly, and maybe you'll live to bury your great grandchildren yet—provided the crop of hemp falls off short!"

"What you want o' me, anyhow?" growled the giant, viciously.

"First and foremost, I want you to see that I've got you lined; got hammer up and finger on trigger; and my name is Pistol Johnny. When all this is painted on your brain, I want you to pull your guns and drop them on the table, with your back turned toward your humble servant. Be a little careless how you do the trick. If one should jar off, the report might scare my finger, and then—fare-thee-well, dearest!"

Light, mocking though both tone and words, Pitt Bynight knew that fiercest threats could contain no deeper menace, and sullenly he followed instructions, then stood unarmed, entirely at the mercy of this satanically Cool Hand.

"Good boy!" nodded Pistol Johnny, stepping lightly forward and taking up the remnant of rope, plenty of which remained for his uses. "As part reward, I promise not to swallow you whole, as I did Thompson Jones. I may even permit you to go free—I *may*, I say, you note!"

Confident as he seemed, Pistol Johnny was taking no wild chances. He made the giant lie down on the floor, on his face, clasping both hands behind his back. Kneeling at his side, the Cool Hand bound him hand and foot, bringing the latter up behind and connecting them with his wrists by a double turn of the rope, testing each knot carefully.

Stepping back and viewing his work for a moment with a grim smile, he produced a second gag, and carefully adjusted it in place.

"I reckon you'll stay put for awhile, anyway," with a light laugh as he rolled the helpless giant on one side, slipping a bundle under his head for comfort. "Let that prove that I'm not too hard on a rascal who would give a finger for one square bite at my throat!"

"Now, look you, Black-beard! Doc Masters will come to visit his patient in the morning. He'll find you here, and he'll set you free, of course. If he is so drunk he forgets all about his patient, I'll take it on myself to see that some one sets you at liberty.

"Tell your story to as many as you please. Fill it with lies, if you like; I'm perfectly willing. But bear this one point in mind:

"Don't you try to levant! I want you right here in Top Notch, and what I want I want *bad*! If you try to slip away, I'll bounce you too quick! And if I have to go to that trouble—well, I'll see that you get every ounce of punishment the law allows, for your part in this nice little game for the Last Hope! Bear this in mind. You can't give me the slip if you try; but you can fit a noose about your own throat if you are such a big fool as to try it on!"

Pistol Johnny turned to Jay Dillon, grasping his collar as he said:

"You're going to take a little walk with me, Jay. Keep praying that none of your friends meet us on the way. I don't want to kill you!"

CHAPTER XVII.

A COOL HAND IN POSSESSION.

"It don't make the shake of a foot difference to me, one way or t'other, mates. It's the boss says do this. It's the boss that pays us our wages. It's him that maps out our line of work. And it's him that will be held responsible if those orders carry us up on the wrong side of the fence. See?"

"That's all right, pard, but I'd heap ruther know fer sartain that they wasn't no wrong side fer to stray onto."

"Ketched 'ligion on the fly, hain't ye, Dandy Trump?" grinned a third member of the little squad who were making their way through the early dawn toward the Last Hope with his rude workings just coming into sight.

"I reckon it's heap more skeer then 'ligion," admitted the accused, with a faint smile that could not entirely conceal his uneasiness. "I cain't help thinkin' of what Pistol Johnny said."

"Bout his bein' 'ministrator fer old Jones?"

"Somethin' like that," nodded Dandy Trump. "Ef I knowed he was only shootin' off his mouth, I'd feel heap easier!"

"All I ask to know is on which line does the cash-box stand?" the first speaker yawned. "Settle that important point, and I'm located as long as the ghost walks regularly. As for rights and wrongs, that lies with other brains to decide. Between Jay Dillon and Pistol Johnny—"

"Mouth that last name a little tenderly, stranger!"

Clear and ringing came the words from their front, and by the increasing light of day, the party could distinguish a human figure confronting them. To all seeming he had just emerged from the little cabin which stood near the principal opening made for developing the Last Hope sufficiently to prove its actual worth.

The party numbered a round dozen in all, well-armed and men more or less noted for their coolness and steadiness under fire, but they came to an abrupt halt as they recognized this slender figure.

"Be durned ef it ain't the critter him own self!"

"Big as life and twice as natural, pardner!" laughed Pistol Johnny, and his keen gray eyes seemed to be making mental notes of each face and figure. "Why not? There's men among you who heard me distinctly declare that I held myself responsible for the Last Hope until the return of Thompson Jones, or the coming of his legal heirs. It's not so easy to run away with a hole in the ground, I know—What instruction did Jay Dillon give you?"

There was a general hesitation and interchange of looks between the party, taken aback by that sharp query. Although they had no acknowledged leader or head, the member who had so freely outlined his position was silently elected to that office then and there.

With a shrug of his shoulders, Joel Logston accepted the nomination, and as though to emphasize it, he stepped a pace or two in advance of his fellows, then responded:

"To come here and take possession of the Last Hope. To hold it against all pretenders; against everybody in general and you in particular, Pistol Johnny."

"Boldly spoken, and I make you my manners, Brother Joel," with a mocking bow. "Still, if I were you I wouldn't enter into possession just at this very moment. I think I'd stop a bit out yonder to talk it over. And as a fair beginning: on what grounds did Jay Dillon base his claims to the Last Hope?"

"That of ownership, of course."

"Gained after what fashion? Did you take

notice what sort of ink was used in signing the deeds and transferring them? Red, wasn't it?"

Joel Logston shrugged his shoulders indifferently.

"All the deeds I saw or cared to see, were yellow, and redeemable in whisky; grub and faro checks understood."

"With a burial lot thrown in, of course," laughed Pistol Johnny, a repeating rifle filling his hands as though by magic. "Sent you up here to get your last medicine. Glad to accommodate a gentleman of Jay Dillon's caliber, though he might have picked out a worse lot to help fill his private cemetery, methinks!"

"If any of the boys need regulating, all right," smiled Logston, falling in with the grim jest. "As for me—medicine in the shape of pills, and blue pills especially, always did nake me sick."

"That's because you've patronized quacks, no doubt. One dose of my pills, administered as I take care they shall be given, kills or cures. As you can see, my pill-box is ready, charged to the muzzle. All that remains is to decide which among you want the earliest doses."

"Don't be in such a rush, Johnny!" with a wave of one hand as the man in possession drew his rifle to his shoulder like one really anxious to get an unpleasant task over with. "Maybe we're not so awful sick as we look, at first glance."

"Your looks belie your feelings, then. You look sick. You look to me as though each and every one of you were risking your precious lives by taking the morning air in this particular quarter. You look as though Top Notch would agree far better with your constitutions. I may be mistaken, but I'd bet a few ducats that should any or all of you insist on remaining near the Last Hope, just so many would go into a rapid decline—too mighty rapid for saying even a baby prayer!"

Light the tone and mocking the air, but underneath all a stern, relentless purpose. Not one of the dozen picked tools could for even a moment doubt the truth of this. Not one among them all but felt assured that Pistol Johnny meant to defend his claim to the bitter end, in case they should attempt to carry out the orders they had received.

Twelve against one; for, thus far, they had received no intimation that Pistol Johnny had backing other than his weapons. Twelve armed men, accustomed to using the tools they carried. Men who had stood fire time and again, asking only a fair and equal chance. Yet they stood irresolute before a single man, smaller, more insignificant-looking than any one of their number, so far as size and physical might went.

Not so strange, after all. They had seen the coolness of this man when a bowling mob was thirsting for his blood. Had seen him gain his ends then, without a scratch. They had seen him face and cow their own chief, single-handed, with every sympathy strongly against him.

They knew that, no matter how rapid their own movements, this man would surely drop a portion of their number before they could kill or overpower him. Which one would he select first? That was the tough point to swallow!

"Jay Dillon sent you here, you say," coldly added Pistol Johnny, leaning back against the cabin wall, but with repeating rifle ready for swift manipulation in case of need. "I know what he claims: that he won the Last Hope of Thom; son Jones at poker."

"And being a debt of honor, of course you'll not dispute it," bowed Logston, with a grim smile.

"Not if Jay Dillon had ever won the claim—other than in his own mind," was the prompt retort. "But you can't always swear by Jay. Sometimes his imagination gets away with his facts. Sometimes he even exaggerates. I don't say lies, because the gentleman is not here to correct my error, if error I make. All the same, I deny that Thompson Jones ever staked the Last Hope at cards. I deny that Jay Dillon ever won the Last Hope at poker, or any other game of cards. I deny that Jay Dillon has any rights on this section, or that he has any right to send his men here. And if you are one-half as sensible as you look, my pretty lads, you'll turn tail, face for Top Notch, and tell Jay to do his own dirty work for the future!"

Joel Logston smiled after a sickly fashion. "Isn't that a tough job you're giving us, Johnny? Twelve men to sneak back and report that they were cowed by a single man with a gun!"

"If you elect to stick it out, you'll begin to think I'm married, with a whole regiment of children, each one of them with a gatling gun in his fist! If you doubt it—ready, babes!"

The heavy wooden shutter was flung open, and a couple of rifles showed their muzzles through the aperture, though the gloomy interior prevented the men without from recognizing who they were that answered so promptly to the call of the cool sharp.

"Not that I think I really need any backing, if you are fools enough to rush matters," coldly added Pistol Johnny, still at careless ease. "But I'd just a little rather not hurt any of you if it can be avoided without too much trouble. You're only Jay Dillon's tools,

You work for pay, and it will take just as much time for you to go back to Top Notch and tell him how matters are situated here, as it will to lie down and stiffen on the sod. He'll hardly refuse to pay for that time. And you may even get a raise of wages for the pure pleasure your tale of this little trip will give the dear fellow!"

"Sure to!" grimly laughed Logston.

"Durn the pay!" blurted out Dandy Trump. "I ain't a hog, ef I do grunt! An' I'm got no furdur business in this quarter—no I hain't!"

"You show your solid sense, pardner," laughed Pistol Johnny, adding in sterner tones: "The rest of you want to make up your minds in a hurry, fer I'm growing tired of feeling away valuable time. Which is it: peace or war?"

"I reckon we won't chip, Johnny."

"All right. I'd hate to wipe such a pretty gang out of existence. Now let me say one more word: 'Go tell your employer that if he wants possession of the Last Hope, he must come and take it himself. Tell him that I'll be here, or hereabouts, whenever he can find time to wander this far from Top Notch. And just add that he'd better pick his gang out of men whom Top Notch won't go into mourning over, when he does come. Ta, ta, gents!"

There was little conversation between the members of the party during the back-trip to Top Notch. This was not entirely through shame borne of their defeat. A man would be worse than foolish to dare almost certain death for such pay as had been promised them.

Jay Dillon had selected them, through one of his agents—Pitt Bynight, to be more particular—on the day before, when he was supposed to be lying under lock and key, kept in bed by the opiate left for him by Dr. Masters. They were bidden take possession of the Last Hope, and hold it against any persons who might attempt to "jump" it.

The only fault which could be found with them, lay in their delay. Yet this was hardly more than natural, remembering what excitement the stage brought into Top Notch the evening before.

Still, it was anything but an agreeable task which Pistol Johnny had set them, and by the time Top Notch was reached, Joel Logston found himself alone with Dandy Trump.

"Don't you try to give me the dirty shake, pard," he grimly laughed as they drew near the building owned by Jay Dillon. "I want one man to catch me when Jay tumbles me over for pay!"

Instead of giving a disagreeable surprise, one awaited their coming. And they stood in amaze as they saw the doubled-up form of Pitt Bynight lying on the floor, bound and gagged, just as Pistol Johnny had left him the evening before.

Glaring at them with bloodshot eyes, Pitt Bynight tried to hasten their recovery, thumping his shaggy head against the floor, each bump an emphatic oath!

A keen knife quickly released the swarthy giant, but several minutes elapsed before he could stagger to his feet, or even utter more than an inarticulate growl. But then, after repeated libations, he managed to tell enough to make them understand what had happened to himself and Jay Dillon.

Joel Longston listened in silence, his face growing hard-set and almost dogged as Pitt Bynight detailed the capture of Jay Dillon by the Cool Hand who had, up to this time, won every move in the game contested by him. Joel was no man's fool. He had no conscience to speak of, and his scruples were hardly worth mentioning. But he possessed a fair modicum of sound "horse sense," and he began to see that this cool little sport was holding a winning hand.

"I'll help spread the story, and won't say a word to hold back any of the boys who fancy the game, but that's my limit from this on, pards. The best I can do for you is to hold out of the game. If I have to chip in on either side, my judgment says I'm Pistol Johnny-ite!" he quietly uttered as Pitt Bynight, suffering tortures as the blood rushed stinging through his limbs after their long inaction, cursed them both for not hastening to give the alarm and setting a strong force on the track of the audacious kidnapper.

"Without another word he turned on his heel and left the room."

In ten minutes all Top Notch knew what had happened, and once more Pistol Johnny was the general topic of conversation. His boldness in entering the town where a price was offered for his capture, dead or alive; the coolness which he displayed in carrying out the kidnapping; the manner in which he had faced down two men, both well known as hard cases to handle; all combined to give him a sort of interest which unconsciously won him more than one well-wisher.

Still, there were enough hot-heads to carry matters with a rush; and in a marvelously short time a party was organized to avenge the insult cast into the face of all Top Notch, by this fresh outrage.

Dandy Trump made ample amends for the silence of Joel Longston, and even joined the

force that set out for the Last Hope, feeling that not even Pistol Johnny would have the "cheek" to hold his claim against such an army.

Neither Joel Logston nor Pitt Bynight were of that arty. The former really began to wish, as he believed, that Pistol Johnny would prove master of the situation. The swarthy giant remembered the parting warning of the Cool Hand too well to dare fly in its face this early. Not but that he had a fair excuse for inaction in his painfully swollen limbs. Even if had so wished, he could not have taken the trip without an hour's rest.

The party lost little time in reaching the Last Hope, but their stern challenge remained unanswered. Not a sound came from the log cabin by the open shaft. Both door and shutter were closed, and seemingly the place was entirely deserted save by their own party. Still, it was some time before they ventured to ascertain this fact. Strong in numbers though they were, they had a fair appreciation of what one cool man could do, if crowded too close.

Finally, under a white flag, George Hampton marched up to the door of the little cabin. To find it unfastened. To find the cabin deserted and a piece of paper pinned to the wall with a thorn the only token of its recent occupation.

That paper bore writing, and was addressed to, "Whom it may concern," and its contents ran as follows:

"Warnin' is hereby given that the undersigned has taken full possession of this claim, known and recorded as The Last Hope, and that all trespassers will be punished strictly according to the code."

"It having come to my knowledge that one Jay Dillon claims to have won this property from its former owner, Thompson Jones, at a game of poker, I publicly deny his claim, and pledge my word to the citizens of Top Notch that they shall hear said Jay Dillon publicly deny his own words, of his own free will."

"I further declare that Jay Dillon led the gang of road-agents by whom Lee Facer was shot to death, and that every man who lent him aid in that dastardly exploit, is now a citizen of Top Notch. If you would know their names, watch and see who seem in a hurry to run away from camp when the contents of this card is made public!"

"If there are any further claims against this property, either false or genuine, get them in readiness, for the son of Thompson Jones will shortly hereafter call on the citizens of Top Notch, ready to make good his pretensions and settle all accounts."

"Pistol Johnny."

"For the heirs."

After a hasty consultation, the notice was replaced on the wall, and search was made for the author, but vainly. Pistol Johnny and his "regiment" had vanished, leaving no traces behind them.

Save in the busy brains of the citizens. They could not forget those bold, uncompromising assertions. They seemed to bear truth in every letter, disagreeable though that might seem to many who still resented the off-hand manner in which this cool sport had played with them. And as they returned to Top Notch, arranging a meeting of citizens where the matter should be fully discussed and some course of action decided upon, the tide seemed to be gradually turning in favor of John Woodcock—turning against Jay Dillon.

Pitt Bynight, as well as others who had taken part in the stage-balting, turned sick within as he heard what had been found at the Last Hope. Like the rest of the criminals, he was strongly tempted to risk all by slinking away from town, despite the pointed manner in which the pistol sharp had written.

He felt that the game was well-nigh lost, and that all who had played a hand on the losing side were in peril of being called to a stern account; and though he had been but a tool, he had worked willingly enough. Then, too, he had done his best to effect the ruin of this very man, who now seemed to hold the winning cards. Would Pistol Johnny overlook that fact? Would he permit him to escape without paying the full penalty? If not for the attempts on his own life, for the part he had played at the death of Steel-face?

Though far from being a favorite in Top Notch, Lee Facer was held to be a fair specimen of his class, and already there was talk of hanging every person who could be proved to have been engaged in his death.

As the day waned and night drew near, Pitt Bynight resolved to risk all in an effort to steal unseen out of Top Notch. Though he bore the warning with which Pistol Johnny had left him still in mind, he was not so frightened as to forget its unlikelihood of being carried out. Smart as he was, the Cool Hand could not cover all the ground, and feeling that the chances were at least a hundred to one in his favor, the Indian-like giant, disguised as far as his physical peculiarities would permit, stole away through the shades of evening, beginning to breathe more freely as he passed the last building.

But then, just as he entered the broken ground where Top Notch was lost to view, a hand tapped him on the shoulder, and a cold voice said:

"I want you, old man!"

A cold shiver shook him from top to toe as he recognized Pistol Johnny!

CHAPTER XVIII.

"LITTLE, BUT BUSINESS STRAIGHT."

ONE of the most thoroughly perplexed men in Top Notch was George Hampton. Honest as day himself, it was hard for him to believe that a man whom he had learned to like as well as he did Jay Dillon, despite the fact of his being a professional gambler, could possibly have played a game so crooked as this. And yet, he was too honest to deny that appearances were steadily turning against the tall card sharp.

Would Pistol Johnny make such pointed charges unless there was a fair foundation for them? Would he talk so boldly about proof?

"It can't be all wind, I'm afraid," the puzzled citizen would mutter to himself while trying to see through the thickening fog. "And then there's Jay's own queer actions, back yonder!" with a nod in the direction of the Lone Cabin.

That was the sorest point to George Hampton. Jay Dillon had played a miserably weak hand ever since Pistol Johnny came upon the boards. His nerve seemed to fail him, just when it was needed the most. He made trip after stumble, and only the strongest of partisanship could blind one to this fact.

On the other hand, the proof was positive that Jay Dillon had not left his room on the day Tansy Dick was "held up" by road-agents, resulting in the death of Lee Facer. Dr. Masters declared that his patient was under the influence of a powerful opiate. The man who kept guard before the door swore point-blank that not a soul crossed the threshold between sun and sun.

"If he had the proof, why not come out flat-footed and show it in the face of Jay Dillon among us all? Why take the trouble to steal him out of town?"

Unable to decide the tangled point himself, George Hampton sent word through town that a public meeting would be held at The Square, for the purpose of settling on a course to pursue in this queerly complicated affair.

The message was a little superfluous, perhaps, since the party of investigation had already come to that conclusion while returning from the Last Hope, but no harm was done, which was one comfort.

There was little delay in the gathering, and with one accord the chair was offered to George Hampton.

"That's where you're 'way off, gentlemen!" he cried with a grim smile. "I wouldn't take the lead again if all Top Notch was the pay! I got my polite sufficiency at the Lone Cabin, and I'm not near as big a hog as I was then."

"Possibly there is no need of electing a chairman, gentlemen," a clear, cool voice uttered from the outer edge of the crowd.

It was a voice which none present seemed to recognize, though each pair of eyes in the gathering settled on the speaker as by common consent.

A slight, slender, trim figure, dressed in fashionable costume, Orientalally speaking: "rigged out like a circus," in Top Notch parlance.

"Pistol Johnny, scrubbed and polished up!" almost howled one of the citizens, on the impulse of the moment; and weapons were hastily jerked from scabbards by fully one-half of those present without stopping to analyze the matter.

The little dude smiled faintly at this sudden outburst, but never flinched an atom, though less keen eyes than his must have seen his peril. Instead of trying to lift his voice in denial above that ugly roar, he drew a white kerchief from his pocket and lightly waved it above his head, an impromptu flag of truce.

At that excited cry George Hampton leaped upon the rocks and took in the situation at a glance. He knew that this stranger was not the already famous pistol sharp, and without losing valuable time in trying to more thoroughly place him, he cried in his sternest tones:

"Hold hard, gents! That's not Pistol Johnny! Hold hard—I'll upset the man that tries to burn powder!"

In those few seconds, the crowd had fallen to each side, leaving the stranger standing alone, mute testimony to the reputation which the Cool Hand had won during the past few days.

It needed only a calm, unprejudiced glance to see that this was not Pistol Johnny. Though that Cool Hand was small, physically speaking, this individual was still smaller. And as the citizens of Top Notch summed him up, they grew indignant at the almost panic into which he had been the primal cause of throwing them.

Despite the ugly growls that came from each side, the stranger showed no uneasiness, lightly drawing the perfumed kerchief across his lips before replacing it in his pocket. If anything, the smile upon his clear, milk-and-roses countenance deepened.

"Sorry to have disturbed you, gentlemen, but—"

"Who are you, anyway?" bluntly demanded George Hampton.

One gloved hand disappeared for an instant, coming forth with a bit of pasteboard daintily held between his fingers.

"My card, if you ask from personal curiosity; if for the public information, perhaps it would save time were I to introduce myself," the cool little dude uttered, advancing to the rocks and

leaping lightly to the side of Top Notch's representative citizen.

Hampton barely glanced at the card dropped into his hand, suffering it to flutter unheeded to his feet. His voice was almost harsh as he spoke again:

"It's not so much your name as your business that I'm trying to come at, stranger! We haven't got time to waste in foolishness, or—"

"This is a meeting called for the purpose of discussing the Last Hope affair, I believe?"

"Yes; and that's just why—"

"That is just why I say that I hardly think we need waste time in going through empty forms, my dear sir," smiling more blandly than ever into that honest, puzzled countenance. "My name is Howard Carter. I am the son of Anson Carter, whom you know better under the name of Thompson Jones, sole owner of the Last Hope."

"Make him show cause!" cried a stern voice from the crowd, rising above the hum of excited interest which greeted this announcement. "It is easy to talk. Who goes bail that this isn't another trick of Pistol Johnny's?"

"I'll accept you, sir, or any other honest man in town as referee, if I am permitted to talk long enough to squarely explain my footing," instantly retorted the nervy little dude. "I have the documents with which to prove my claims. And if they fail to be sufficient, in your eyes, I'll bring forward witnesses whose evidence not even the most suspicious in all this assembly can long withstand. Can I say fairer?"

"It sounds fair enough, but—"

"You are men grown," curtly interjected the little dude, as the man hesitated, at a loss for a word that would express his exact meaning. "You have your reasoning faculties. It is to be presumed that you can tell the difference between legal proofs and unsupported falsehoods. I frankly offer to produce my proofs for inspection, if I am permitted to do so. If I fail to make my claims good—surely you are numerous enough to make it mighty unhealthy for one little runt!"

The last words, coming from those lips, gave a comic twist to the half-defiance that instantly struck the fancy of the crowd, and a laugh ran around the group. But as George Hampton lifted a hand, silence followed.

They all knew and appreciated him. Slow, but sure, was one of his nicknames. And all save a small minority whose interests would be best served by a continued fog, were willing to let Honest George run the machine after his own slow fashion.

"We'll give you all the trial you can ask for, young man. It's the solid truth we want to get at most, and if you can help us to that, in this case, I'll head a subscription list to have your statue set up right here in the center of town!"

Howard Carter could not help laughing at this, spoken so earnestly, with so much dogged honesty, despite its ridiculous nature.

"I mean every word of it!" declared Hampton, brushing a hand over his heated brow. "This infernal mystery is driving me half-wild! I haven't eaten a square meal, or had a solid sleep since Jay Dillon brought word into town of old Jones's murder!"

"Otherwise Anson Carter, my father," quietly supplemented Howard.

"That's your say-so! We only knew him as Thompson Jones," cut in the man who had before expressed his doubts.

"He had his reasons for passing under an assumed name while living here," was the cold response. "If you have no worse reasons for concealing your past life—drop that, you cur!"

From just where came the derringer which showed in the gloved grip of the nervy little dude, not one present save himself could have even guessed. Enough that the business-like weapon was there, with its large caliber bearing full upon the angry citizen whose revolver was only half drawn from its scabbard.

"I didn't come here to mix in a row, but if I am a tenderfoot, I've learned enough of your ways and customs to never permit a man to get the drop on me," coldly added Carter, his hand steady as fate, his eyes glowing steadily. "Drop that gun, pardner! Drop it—or I'll drop you!"

As customary, George Hampton came in heavily on the homestretch, and his pistol emphasized his stern speech:

"Cheese it, Dignan! This is a meeting for talk, not shooting, but if powder must be burned, it's just such hot-heads as you who'll be the very first ones to get scorched—and scorched bad, too! Put up your gun, or pull out o' this!"

"And I'll set the example, at the same time begging pardon of the assembly for permitting the snarl of a cur to lead me into a rudeness," bowed the little dude, his derringer vanishing as it had made its appearance.

Though the fellow who started this little by-play had no such intention, he had gained more good will for the stranger than Howard Carter could have won for himself in an hour's argument. The incident showed all present that, despite his effeminate appearance, he was not wanting in true grit; and with plenty of "sand," a man may be forgiven all other weaknesses.

Sulkily Dignan obeyed, muttering something about fair play, but not daring to push the quar-

rel further just then. Those nearest him began to crowd and hustle him, and a much less acute man would have taken the hint without further delay.

Howard Carter did not vouchsafe him a second glance, but "got down to business" without further delay.

"Gentlemen, before exhibiting my credentials I beg you to hear me utter a few words. They will pave the way to our better understanding, and will explain why I ventured to state that there was no particular need of electing a chairman for this meeting."

"No doubt the majority of you were acquainted with the man you knew only as Thompson Jones. This being a fact, you need hardly be informed that he was, in some respects, of rather a peculiar disposition. It is not so easy, or agreeable, for a son to speak in this strain of a father, but circumstances drive me to say so much, at least."

"It need not greatly surprise you, then, to learn that he was here under an assumed name, for—"

"They're a heap more in the same fix, boss!" grinned one of the crowd, unable to resist the temptation, though there was no especial malice in his voice.

"Many of whom, no doubt, could show far more cogent reasons for a change of name when they took a change of venue," bowed the dude, with a half-smile that still further pointed his meaning.

A general laugh followed this hit, but Howard Carter did not join in it. Drawing his slender figure erect, his face cold and grave, he waited until silence was restored, then added:

"As one man speaking to other men, I distinctly say to you that there was not even the shadow of sin attached to this alteration of names. My father was no criminal. And before I leave Top Notch for good and all, I pledge you my word of honor to make this clear as day to the most prejudiced man in this assembly."

George Hampton caught his hand, saying earnestly:

"We all know that, without your proof. If Jones was queer, that is the worst any one in Top Notch ever hinted about him. I only wish he was alive and well to hear me say it!"

"Unfortunately he is not," was the slow, grave response.

"Who killed him? Was it young Unwin?"

"Tracy Unwin would rather have lost his own life twice over," was the instant response. "The criminal was Jay Dillon!"

Then there was a sensation.

George Hampton fell back, paling, half-angry, half-doubting. Men in the crowd surged to and fro, shouting, gesticulating; more weapons than one flashing in the sunlight. And though some were turned toward the man who thus charged the tall gambler with being the real criminal, through whose deeds the town had been so sorely upset, he never flinched, never turned a shade paler. With folded arms he gazed undauntedly at the swaying crowd. Only a slight smile curling his lips. Until, as though losing patience at the delay, his lips parted to utter:

"Shoot if you are going to, gentlemen! If not—summer down and hear me through. One or the other, and that pretty quick!"

Ancient as the "chestnut" was, it seemed just the thing to catch the humor of the gathering, and as quickly as it had broken out, the uproar was stilled.

"It may save us both time and trouble, gentlemen," Howard calmly spoke, showing not the slightest trace of excitement or uneasiness. "If I remind you that I am a man grown, in years if not in dimensions. And as a man, I am responsible for every word I now utter. As a man, I hold myself ready to prove all I charge, or give ample satisfaction to those who may feel wronged by the charges I bring against them."

"If Jay Dillon was here to talk back," sneered one.

"I promise you that Jay Dillon shall appear before you, to deny or admit all I charge him with," coldly. "Those charges: mark them down in your mind, as I make them, if you please."

"I charge Jay Dillon with plotting to secure possession of the property known as the Last Hope. I accuse him of murder while trying to carry those plans into execution."

"In the first place, he tried his best to draw the man whom he, and you, knew only as Thompson Jones, into a game of cards, thinking that with his known skill and dexterity he would have an easy victory. He failed in this, for Jones was no gambler. And even if he had been one, the temptation would have failed. He had but one object in life—to win a fortune equal to one which he had lost years before—and in losing which he had become an exile from home and kindred."

"Then Jay Dillon learned that his intended victim was a married man, with living children; that he intended to send them word of his good fortune. On learning this, Jay Dillon sought to gain his ends by briefer if blacker deeds."

"He decoyed Thompson Jones to the Lone Cabin, and there shot him down from behind! To make sure work, he stabbed the groaning man to the heart! And to cover over his own

bloody tracks, he resolved to fix the crime on Tracy Unwin."

"Dipping his finger in the blood which flowed from the veins of his victim, Jay Dillon wrote the awful accusation which he afterward swore to you he found, written by the murdered man. Then, when he believed he had secured a perfect alibi for himself, he pretended to make the discovery of the crime, by accident!"

"Who took away the body? Who changed the writing?" breathlessly asked George Hampton, eager to have the mystery solved, though his honest heart felt sick within him as he grew convinced that the man whom he had called friend for so long was really the criminal.

"The gentleman whom you know as Pistol Johnny," was the prompt response. "His reasons shall be made clear to you when the proper time comes, and also his reasons for not telling you all he knew when Tracy Unwin was on trial for life."

"Never mind how he was enabled to do all this, yet have as good an alibi as that which Jay Dillon prepared. I am not quite ready to tell all this, preferring to wait until my friends can bear witness as well."

"And right here is as good a time as any for settling that matter, I reckon. I pledge my word that Tracy Unwin has committed no crime, although you have taken the liberty of putting a price upon his head. And Pistol Johnny—"

"Blood for blood!" grated a savage voice from the crowd. "He shot Hod Geary—"

"Preferring to shoot rather than be shot—and the man who blames him for that, is either an ass or a scoundrel as black hearted as Hod Geary himself!" boldly cried the nervy little dude.

"Let him come in an' stan' trial, then!"

"With men of your class as judge and jury, of course," with a bow of contempt toward the shaggy-haired ruffian who was viciously fingering his weapons.

There was no immediate response. The crowd seemed suddenly to have grown cold, even suspicious toward the stranger who flung such hard truths in their faces. The first enthusiasm was dying out, and men began to remember how they had been laughed at and played with by Pistol Johnny and his allies, open or secret.

Howard Carter saw all this, but he did not hesitate. He felt that the risk must be run, and wanted it over with. He lifted his hand and floated out a white kerchief. Almost immediately a tall figure made its appearance down the street, now entirely deserted for the square, rapidly advancing toward the mass of rocks thus designated.

"Yonder comes Tracy Unwin, ready to answer the charges which may be brought against him," coldly uttered Howard Carter, pointing out the approaching figure to the crowd.

"And as for Pistol Johnny—"

"How d'y, gents!"

Clear, musical, blandly sounded the words, in a tone which nearly every citizen there assembled could have sworn to without stopping to single out the lips that uttered them. And as they wheeled about, a white mule slowly stepped in view around the rocks, with a man seated on its back, one leg carelessly crossed over the pommel, both hands toying with a revolver.

CHAPTER XIX.

WHAT, AND WHY, AND WHEREFORE.

PISTOL JOHNNY and Al Borak!

This was just a little more than the citizens of Top Notch had calculated upon, even in that time of surprises, and during those first few moments it would be hard to decide which impulse ruled the most minds then present—how to get away from Pistol Johnny, or how to "get away" with the Cool Hand.

"Don't disturb yourselves on my account, gentlemen, or I'll feel forever sorry that I came; I never did like to be made company of."

Sucking dove never cooed more sweetly, and the famous smile of Ah Sin was as a ferocious grimace in comparison with that which Pistol Johnny bestowed upon the startled citizens of Top Notch, over the head of Al Borak. Honey distilled and doubly refined—yet all who heard and saw felt that there was a keen and deadly sting hidden in it all.

Despite his careless attitude, they saw that the little sport was never more thoroughly on his guard than now. Though it seemed through pure force of habit that his fingers were playing with the polished butts of the weapons which had gone far to fix a title upon him, those who noted the actions knew that a single breath would be ample time for those small hands to draw and begin trigger-play.

"And I pledge you my honor, men of Top Notch, that all we ask is a calm and impartial hearing," quickly cried Howard Carter, detecting signs of impending trouble. "We are but three men against fully one hundred. If that hundred is not composed wholly of cowards, it will reserve its decision until our case is fairly placed before it for judgment."

A bold hazard, but Howard Carter recognized the emergency, and knew that only strong measures could save them now.

"And if we fail to show perfectly clean hands from first to last in this affair, you can mete out the punishment you think suitable for our transgressions," clearly, calmly uttered Tracy Unwin, springing upon the rocks and taking his stand beside the little dude.

"Gospel truth, if my lips didn't utter it, gents," bowed Pistol Johnny, smiling between the ears of his white charger.

And slow but sure, George Hampton helped to fill the breach.

"Simmer down, friends!" he cried, grave and earnest in face, voice and manner. "The sooner this infernal tangle is straightened out, the better it'll be for all of us! And as the shortest way of getting at the bottom facts, let's hear what these gentlemen have to say for themselves. I'm going to—and I'll let daylight through the first fool that tries to cheat me out of it, too!"

"How 'bout Hod Geary?"

"Whar's Jay Dillon?"

"Who butchered Lee Facer?"

"Have patience for ten minutes, gentlemen, and I pledge my word that each and every one of your questions shall be fully answered; if not, or if unsatisfactorily, you will still have the remedy in your own hands—fully as much as you have now. I beg of you to listen to our side of this affair, but if you are determined to exact a snap-judgment on us, we'll try and keep the flies off o' you!"

Sharp and business-like came the the last words from the lips of the little dude, and into his hands slipped a revolver to mate the ugly derringer. And for the first time in their experience, the men of Top Notch saw Tracy Unwin with pistols in his hands; and he seemed thoroughly at home with them, too!

"Me too!" broke the second of silence which followed that bold ultimatum.

The bland voice of Pistol Johnny, who still sat cross-legged on the back of his white mule, but whose revolvers were clear of their scabbards. And as though he felt that he must fall into line, Al Borak lifted up his voice most effectively.

"Loaded to the muzzle, and warranted to kill at either end, gents!" smiled the Cool Hand, catching at this little diversion and making the most of it. "As a rule, Al Borak lets me do his talking for him, but whenever he finds a lot of his own race together, he just loves to lift up his own voice and exhort 'em!"

Trifles count often when heavy blows fail, and this occasion was one of the instances. The fling was clumsy enough, critically viewed, but it "hit 'em heavy," just then. Despite themselves, a number in the crowd broke into a laugh, and George Hampton drew a long breath of relief, for he felt that the worst was past. It is seldom that a laughing mob passes entirely beyond control.

"Don't rub it in too hot, pard, an' we've got 'em right whar they live!" he muttered hurriedly to the little dude.

"Good boy!" laughed Pistol Johnny, scratching the mule between its ears with a revolver muzzle. "Never knew you to make a slip-up when called on, but you never did yourself prouder than right now! You're only a mule, but you can out-talk any of the two-legged kind, and I'm going to give you another chance! Wake up, beauty unadorned!"

Al Borak gave a squeal, humping his back sharply, and Pistol Johnny shot through the air over its head, alighting safely on the rocks by the side of his friends. And as he did so, Al Borak again brayed in anything but musical accents.

"Sends me as his mouthpiece, gents," laughed Pistol Johnny, his weapons disappearing from his hands. "Says one donkey is good as another, as long as I behave myself! And here you have me, ready to talk, drink or fight with the best men you can shove forward; and talk, for choice!"

"That's just what we want most," quickly interposed Hampton, fearing the hot-heads among his own people. "If you can clear up this infernal mystery, I'll take all the drinking and fighting off your hands, while you split your throat talking!"

"Tell your story, Mr. Woodcock," gravely added Howard Carter. "Time enough for settling personal disputes after that is fully made clear."

Pistol Johnny seemed in no particular hurry to begin, urgent though his companions were. With an easy smile playing about his lips, he glanced leisurely over the little sea of faces.

There were dark and ugly frowns to be seen, but for the most part curiosity was the uppermost feeling. This strange affair had driven all else to the rear, and the experienced sport felt pretty secure in his belief that until the knottiest points were cleared up, there would come no general outbreak.

"All right, since such appears to be the wish of the majority," he cheerfully said, with a social little nod toward the eager audience. "I don't advertise to be much of an orator, but when I get down to it in sober earnest, I can talk plainly enough to make my meaning understood."

"Tell how you came to be mixed up in this affair, first."

"That was pure chance. I was bound for

Top Notch, looking for a royal tiger with unclipped claws, when I took a notion that the trail wasn't quite as straight as it might be, and so struck out on my own hook, 'cross-lots. Not the first time I've proved the truth of the old saw about the longest road, but never quite so much to my ultimate satisfaction.

"Night overtook me, and for the life of me I couldn't tell where I was or how to get out of it. So I concluded to camp down right where I was, and trust to daylight for better luck. I turned Al Borak loose to forage for himself, and was scratching around for a warm hole to snuggle down in my own self, when the report of gun or pistol hinted that, perhaps, I might get a warm bite and softer bed."

"I followed the sound, but failed to make any discovery for nearly an hour. Then I stumbled on a cabin, while trying to find my way back to my mule. You know the place—I've seen you there, I believe."

"The Lone Cabin!" exclaimed George Hampton.

"That identical palace," with a short nod. "And, as I afterward noted, the time was just on the edge of midnight. Please bear that in mind, won't you? It will help further along."

"There was no light visible, but I felt pretty sure the shot had come from close about this place, and I rapped. Knocked until I was tired, then opened the door and stepped inside. Struck a match—and found a body lying on the floor. Thompson Jones, as you may guess."

"Dead, of course?" slowly uttered Hampton, with a curious sinking at his heart as he thought of the old friendship, now dying, but so hard.

"Not quite," gravely, losing all trace of flippancy. "I thought it was a corpse for some little time, though the limbs were limp and there was warmth in the body. I manufactured a light, and fell to work the best I knew how, none the less vigorously because of the words I saw written in blood on the floor."

"I had my reward in the end. The poor fellow recovered sufficiently to tell me his story, and lived long enough to answer a few questions."

"He said that a man named Jay Dillon had decoyed him to the hut, and shot him down from behind, without warning; that Jay Dillon stabbed him, to make all sure; that it was the finger of Jay Dillon that wrote the false accusation on the floor, then dipped the finger of his victim in blood, to surely carry out his vile plot."

Pistol Johnny stopped short, interrupted by the sound that suddenly broke from the crowd. Not all of one import. Among the curses aimed at Jay Dillon, were deep growlings of unbelief in this strange recital. The tall gambler was not yet without friends who were willing and even eager to defend his good name.

Once more George Hampton filled the breach.

"Play white, boys, or I'll set the music for a lively dance! Grit your teeth and bear it until Pistol Johnny gets through with his story. It cuts me deeper than it can any one of you, but I'm not kicking against the truth—and truth he's giving us, I verily believe!"

More than the first fierce threat, those closing words influenced the excitable citizens. There was no pretense in that pained face, in that quivering voice. Not a man present but knew how sincerely George Hampton had loved Jay Dillon. Not one but knew he was as honest as day. If he began to believe the tall gambler was guilty, surely there must be truth in those grave charges!

"What I have told you, gentlemen, I am responsible for, remember," gravely added Pistol Johnny, when silence was restored. "Thompson Jones lived long enough to tell me who struck him down, and who wrote those damning words on the floor. He lived long enough to beg me to do all I could to clear the innocent, as well as bring the real criminal to justice. And before he died, he begged me to take one other oath; just what that was, I'll tell you later."

"I changed the board with the writing on, as you will see if you take the trouble to visit the shanty again. I replaced it with a slab taken from the further side of the flooring, and then wrote the words Jay Dillon found there Sunday evening."

"Why did I take so much trouble? Why did I not carry the words of Thompson Jones direct to you? Partly because of the oath I have alluded to, but mainly because I knew Jay Dillon had carefully guarded himself; had prepared an alibi, most likely; would be talking to his friends and comrades, while I would be among strangers. And so—I concluded to trap him in his own meshes."

"At the worst, I knew I could claim no murder where there was no corpse to be found, and I carried Thompson Jones away, his hurts wrapped in my blanket to keep the blood from betraying my course. With the aid of my mule, I got him far enough away to insure all the time I would be likely to need, and then—I came to Top Notch, getting here before daylight."

"You know what followed. Jay Dillon made one mistake, in not paying the scene of his crime another visit before carrying the tidings to Top Notch. And yet, that was natural

enough. It was so seldom that any one visited the cabin, thanks to its lonely situation and its evil reputation. And even a murderer has certain compunctions, you know!"

"Thanks to this, Jay Dillon stumbled over an awkward snag, and by the same fact I was enabled to save Tracy Unwin from the rope without breaking the oath I gave the murdered gentleman."

"What led Jay Dillon to play such a red hand? The Last Hope! He coveted that bit of property, and tried to draw its owner into gambling where he might win it by comparatively fair means. Failing there, and learning through two of his tools—Hod Geary and Pitt Bynight—that there had been a quarrel between Thompson Jones and Tracy Unwin, about a letter which the former had sent or meant to send to the family of the mine-owner, Jay felt that only swift playing could win. He played a red trump, and hired the two rascals to swear to threats on the part of Tracy Unwin. If a man was hung for the murder, no one would ever suspect his agency. And when the dead was buried, who could deny the claim of winning the Last Hope, at poker?"

"You saw how Jay Dillon was startled when Unwin spoke of having written for the heirs to come on at once. Until then he believed that only Thompson Jones had written them, and had counted on a week or two of grace. In that belief he had sent word to Lee Facer, who was mixed up in the game, to be on the lookout for the heirs."

"Chance favored Steel-face, as you seem to know him best. He made friends with the heirs, one of whom now stands before you. He delayed their arrival here, as some of you may have heard, until his partner was fully prepared to receive them."

"With the inside view I had of the case, it was not difficult to give a guess at the next move, and I did what I could to block it. Yet it was a bit of pure luck that led to my overhearing Jay Dillon and his picked gang—prominent among whom was Pitt Bynight—making their arrangements."

"Word had been sent to Steel-face to have the heirs on a certain trip of the stage. Jay Dillon and his gang were to play road-agents, stopping Tansy Dick and kidnapping this gentleman and his sister, taking them to a secure hiding-place where they would be easily handled until they could be forced into transferring the Last Hope to their captors, as ransom for their lives."

"Even yet I was not quite ready to open up on Jay Dillon, and so I consulted with Tracy Unwin. We concluded to play another little trick on the noble Jay-bird, and we ambushed the coach beyond the point where it was intended to be held up."

"Our plan worked to perfection, yet for one thing I am really sorry, though Lee Facer richly deserved what he received at the hands of his allies. I thought only to give Jay something to curse and wonder over. I swear to you, gentlemen, that if I had even dreamed of such a thing happening, I would never have played the trick, amply as Steel-face had earned his reward—the fate which met him at the hands of Jay Dillon and his gang!"

An ugly growl rose from a portion of the crowd, among which may have been some of the very men engaged in that tragic stage-stopping. And one voice was lifted in:

"Talk's mighty easy when they ain't nobody to talk back! Poor Lee Facer is in his grave, an' Jay Dillon ain't nigh enough fer to give it the lie!"

"It's a darn fool that cain't make out a good showin' when they ain't but one side of a story to tell!"

"An' thar's Hod Geary, too!"

"Once foolin' is heap plenty, I say!"

There was no actual outbreak, as yet. No weapons were actually drawn, partly because the growlers felt themselves as yet in a minority, but more from a dislike to openly dare those four men on the rocks; for every man present knew that George Hampton was thoroughly converted to a belief in the guilt of his former friend and that he would be fully as swift as the other trio to repel an attack.

With a cold, half-smile Pistol Johnny listened, his gray eyes passing from the face of one growler to that of the next to chip in. He never touched a weapon, never made a sign of anger or impatience. But when the growls died away, he spoke coldly, distinctly:

"For those who have listened to my little talk in patience, I give my thanks, and pledge them my word that they shall never regret the common politeness which they have shown toward a stranger. And for you, growlers, fault-finders; what is it you want more?"

"The truth!" boldly cried one of the men who had spoken before.

"That I have ladled out to you in chunks, but you seem to need a special introduction to truth before you can recognize it. That's your misfortune, not my fault. But I'm the most accommodating fellow you ever met in a month's travel! I'll do almost anything to keep out of even a fight of words."

"Business, Johnny!" sharply interposed Howard Carter.

"Business goes! What more do you want, fellows?"

"We want to hear the other side o' the story, afore we settle on the neck that hollers loudest ter a hemp-tie."

Pistol Johnny laughed softly, seemingly more amused than put out.

"And when you want a thing, you want it bad, of course! Well, I'm not going to give you a handle for a row on that point. Name your witness, and if he's in this part of the country, I'll break my neck but what I'll bring him out to show cause."

"Then fetch Jay Dillon forward!" with a sneering laugh.

But the shot failed to hit the mark as intended. Pistol Johnny never "turned a hair" to use the vernacular, and his answer came prompt and decided:

"Jay Dillon goes! I'll bring him before you and turn his tongue loose. I'll let him have his own say-so, and if I am not fully borne out by his evidence, then you need look no further for the neck! I'll furnish that, if you'll supply the rope. Anything more?"

Taken aback by this unexpected yielding, the fellow remained silent. He was really an honest enough partisan, who stubbornly declined to believe the black charges brought against the gambler. But this remarkably candid offer seemed to stun him for the time being.

Another of the growlers took his place, viciously determined to balk the cool sport who seemed to carry all before him.

"Fetch one more witness, ef you dare!"

"I'm better on the dare than on the do, but I'll strain my suspenders terribly to satisfy you, dear fellow, if you'll condescend to name the witness you especially favor."

"Call him Thompson Jones, fer a flyer, then!" with a malicious grin.

"I'll call him back from the grave, since no less will satisfy you!"

CHAPTER XX.

ONE HOUR'S GRACE.

COOL and smiling stood Pistol Johnny as he uttered these words, but there was something in his manner that sent a curious thrill through the crowd; something that seemed to say this was no blasphemous boast on his part.

Then, with a flash that was little short of inspiration, George Hampton tore off his hat, flinging it high into the air, fairly yelling:

"I know it! Thompson Jones is no more dead than I am!"

"Thanks to this man, after kind Heaven," earnestly added Howard Carter, grasping the laughing little sport by the hand and shaking it warmly.

"Well, I reckon the little game's about played out, anyway, so I'll come down without waiting for a shot. All the same, gents," with a smile that seemed to include every person within reach of his voice, "you shall see and hear the witnesses these thoughtful friends of Jay Dillon—"

His voice was smothered by the wild outburst from the crowd, and had the tall gambler been within reach at that moment, he would have been torn limb from limb; so suddenly and entirely had this Cool Hand won the desperate game.

Of course there was considerable talking, many questions to ask and answer, before anything like strict business could be attended to, but that need hardly find a record in this connection.

Enough, that after it was generally understood that Thompson Jones was still living, and in a fair way to ultimately recover from his injuries, the opponents of Jay Dillon had matters all their own way. Not a voice was uplifted in favor of the card sharp, and as it afterward proved, the very men who had joined him in the stage-stopping that ended in the killing of Lee Facer, were the loudest in their condemnation of him and their praises of Pistol Johnny.

"Let them play it out on that line," the Cool Hand muttered, half-pityingly, half-contemptuously to Tracy Unwin. "The miserable devils are suffering death with each breath they draw, through fear of exposure. They'll slip away just as soon as they see a chance—and good riddance say I!"

Still, strongly as the tide had turned in their favor, our friends were stubborn in their resolve to clear everything up beyond the possibility of an error or doubt. They explained that Anson Carter was far too weak and ill to permit his coming to town, but he was waiting to tell his story. With him was held prisoner Jay Dillon and Pitt Bynight, both of whom had expressed their willingness to make free confession.

"On one condition, gentlemen," gravely added Pistol Johnny. "That condition we fully agreed to, and it only requires your signature to make all clean sailing for this company. If you won't give that; if you try to break it after given; there is bound to be the prettiest little circus mortal eyes ever witnessed!"

"What we have agreed to, surely you need not shrink from, friends," gravely added Howard Carter. "Say that you will respect our pledge, and we'll show you where our witnesses lie."

"I pass my word, for one," promptly uttered George Hampton, his honest face pale but steady, for he readily divined what that pledge consisted of. "And if the crowd tries to go back on it, they've got to crawl all over me, too!"

All the majority wanted was a leader from their own ranks, and in Honest George they found him. A chorus of shouts went up, and in five minutes more the entire matter was understood: any pledges which Pistol Johnny or Howard Carter had made their captives, were to be respected by the men of Top Notch.

This last stumbling-block removed from the path, little more time was cut to waste. Ten minutes later, Top Notch was a deserted village, and with Al Borak in the lead, an eager procession was hurrying through the hills, eager to witness the last scene in the drama.

Past the Lone Cabin, deeper into the wilds, only coming to a halt when Al Borak stopped short as a shrill, cracked voice called out:

"Halt an' spit out the countersign, less you want to go to glory amen without eend!"

"That's all right, Tansy," laughed Pistol Johnny, looking upward where a weather-beaten face took on an immense grin as it was thrust through a mass of vines and bushes. "How's everything?"

"Like a little red wagon, pard! Fetched 'em, didn't ye?"

"Bet we did, Tansy! And never needed your mighty arm, neither. Tell you all about it—I say, gents!" with a rueful smile coming into his face as he glanced over the eager assembly.

"Blessed if I thought to count noses before I gave you that invitation! The den won't hold more than a handful, and—"

"If you will kindly select half a dozen of your representative citizens, and take the story from their lips at second-hand, until my poor father is strong enough to come to you, instead, that will be one more debt owing you," interposed Howard Carter.

"And you can hear both Jay and Pitt get off their little speeches, you know," smiled Pistol Johnny, noting the shade which came into nearly every face. "That will be circus enough, won't it? Thompson Jones has given you bother enough as a dead man; don't insist on making him a corpse in earnest!"

And so the matter was arranged. The selection was made, and Howard Carter led the half dozen up the steep trail and into a small cave, where they found Thompson Jones lying on a pallet of leaves and grass, covered over with blankets. He was looking terribly pale and haggard, but when they heard his voice and saw the bright glitter in his eyes, they knew that he still had a good fighting chance for recovery.

Never mind repeating the story he told, since it has already been recorded with sufficient clearness for the understanding of those who read these lines. Enough that he substantiated the story told by Pistol Johnny in every respect. And as Howard Carter brought Jay Dillon, now hardly the ghost of his recent self, forward to the couch, asking him if the accusation was true, he stolidly replied that it was.

Then Pistol Johnny, aided by Tansy Dick, who had been enlisted as a nurse immediately after he brought Steel-face into Top Notch, led Dillon and Bynight out from the cave and exhibited them to the crowd. Wild, savage yells greeted their appearance, but the Cool Hand quickly checked this, and then put question after question to the prisoners, until the entire story was told, until every charge brought them was confessed as truthful.

Dillon admitted he murdered Thompson Jones, as he firmly believed until he met him face to face after his capture at Top Notch by Pistol Johnny. His main object was to obtain possession of the Last Hope, and while attempting to have Tracy Unwin hung for the deed, he had in his bosom an "IOU" signed by Thompson Jones, acknowledging the loss of the claim at cards, his own fingers having penned that name.

But after the supposed corpse disappeared, and Pistol Johnny so deftly baffled his plans, he had not dared openly make use of this forgery.

Bynight sullenly told his part of the affair. Both himself and Hod Geary had stretched the truth in giving their evidence as to the rupture between Thompson Jones and Tracy Unwin. The foreman was discharged, but he made no threats, whatever.

He admitted being one of the gang that stopped Tansy Dick, and told how Steel-face came by his death. He gave the names of each one who took part in that expedition; and investigation showed that, though the majority of these persons were with the party when it set out from Top Notch to learn the entire truth, not one of them was now present!

They had slipped off, seeing safety in flight.

"Good riddance of bad rubbish," laughed Pistol Johnny. "I said as much when I saw them dropping out of the ranks, and I say the same now that your eyes are open. It would be a pity to mar the joy of this occasion by turning it into hangman's day, and—"

"But them two devils ain't goin' to slip away!" snarled one of the crowd. "Git ropes, boys! We'll hang them, anyway!"

"Not without you hang me first, men of Top Notch!" cried Pistol Johnny, his hands grasping the tools he knew so well how to use, his gray eyes fairly flashing with stern determination. "I've passed my word of honor to give Jay Dillon and Pitt Bynight one hour's grace before a step is taken to arrest them, and I'll make my word good if it costs half the lives in this assembly!"

As by magic Howard Carter, Tansy Dick, Tracy Unwin and George Hampton were ranged beside Cool Hand, armed and resolute. And then, like an angel of peace, Mabel Carter glided in front of the captives, her trembling hands stretched out appealingly, her eyes moist with tears, her sweet voice quavering as she begged for peace, for mercy.

Weapons such as they themselves carried might have failed to quell those mad passions, but the men of Top Notch were human; and being human, the prayers of beauty disarmed them.

As one man they submitted, only asking that a warning be added to the hour of grace: never to return to Top Notch, under penalty!

And then, their bonds cast off, their weapons restored, the two exiled men were sent away, to the fate which was recorded against their names in the book of doom.

Pistol Johnny afterward confessed that he had not been entirely candid in telling his story of the Lone Cabin and its tragedy. He was not alone when he discovered the wounded mine-owner, having a comrade with him, by whose said he was enabled to make a neater job of the matter than otherwise would have been the case. This mate had a pretty thorough knowledge of the country round about, and he it was that led the way to the cave, when Thompson Jones pleaded so pitifully for silence as to his still being alive.

That dastardly attack had broken him down, mentally, for the time being. He felt that if Jay Dillon was to even suspect his continued existence, he would be traced out and murdered. Knowing how all-important it was that his mind be at ease in that critical stage, Pistol Johnny and his mate took the solemn oath which he exacted from both. And though this made it doubly hard to save Tracy Unwin from the toils which Jay Dillon had cast about him, it was kept until the end. For, when he knew that Dillon was powerless to work further injury, Anson Carter—to give him his right name—gave back the pledge he had exacted.

While his partner acted as nurse to Anson Carter, Pistol Johnny was at liberty to work out his counter-plots, with the result recorded.

Of course Howard and Mabel were taken direct to the wounded man, after their "kidnaping" from the stage, remaining there until Pistol Johnny was ready to "ring down the curtain!"

A month later, the remains of a tall man were found in the hills. There was a bullet hole through the grinning skull, and rusty pistols lying near by, but whether it was a case of suicide or murder, could only be surmised.

The right hand had been shattered by a bullet.

As soon as Anson Carter recovered sufficiently to endure the trip, he and Mabel went back to the States, leaving Howard in charge of the Last Hope. The "little dude" had become a prime favorite in Top Notch, and when the mine was sold out to a stock company the town almost went into mourning over his departure.

Tracy Unwin went back with him, and shortly after there came word of a wedding, in which the principal performers were well known at Top Notch.

As for Pistol Johnny: he lingered for a while about Top Notch, then "moved on" once more. And Tansy Dick went with him.

THE END.

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